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THE IDEAL ARTIST.

VOL III.



THE IDEAL ARTIST

A NOVEL

BY

F. BAYFORD HARRISON

..... Love—
A more ideal artist he than all.
TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1893.

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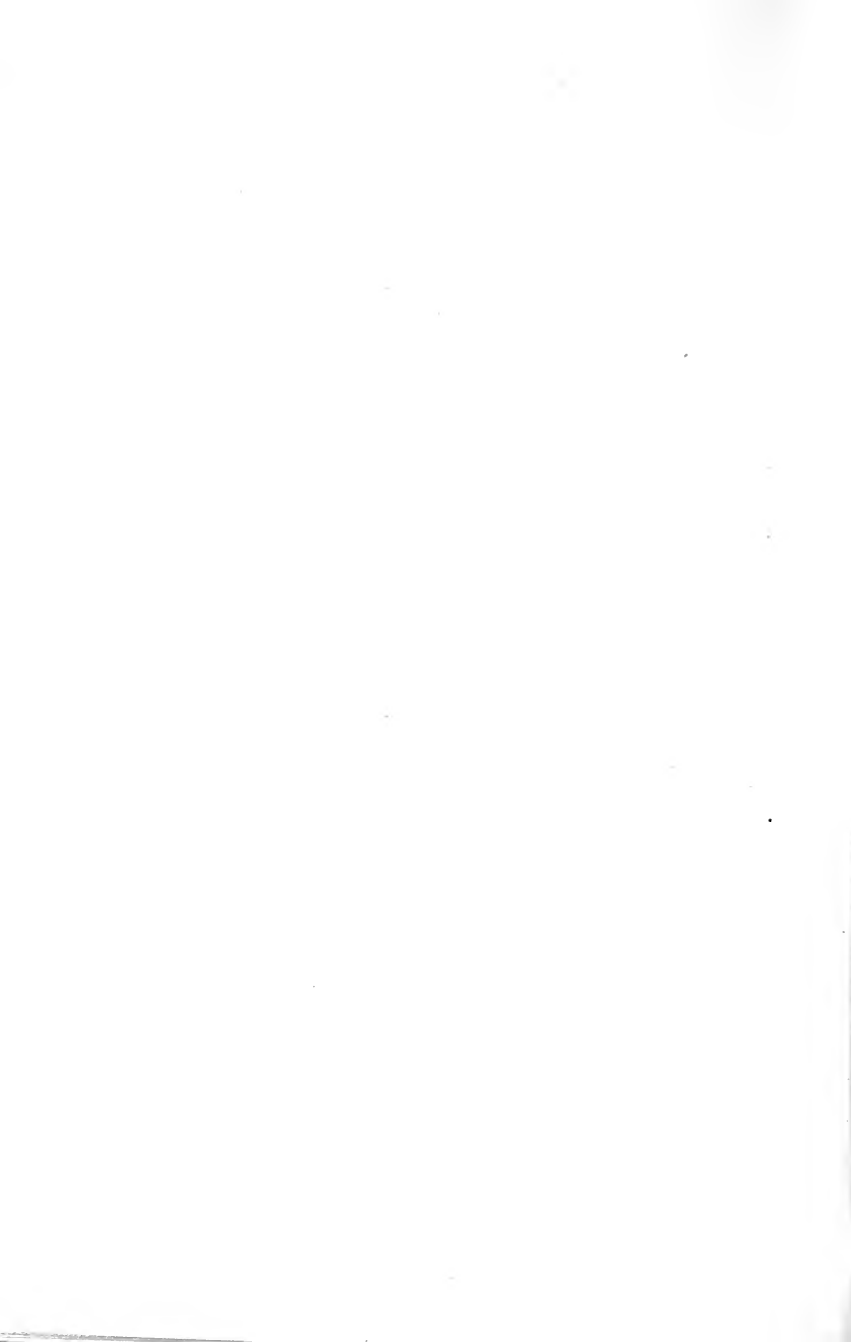
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BOOK II.

(CONTINUED.)



THE IDEAL ARTIST.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PERSONAL ATTACK.

The sea of fortune doth not ever flow,
She draws her favours to the lowest ebb :
Her tides have equal times to come and go ;
Her loom doth weave the fine and coarsest web :
No joy so great but runneth to an end,
No hap so hard but may in fine amend.
R. SOUTHWELL (1560—1595).

THE suggestion made by Flora de Vere that Felix Vereker should come down to Strathtartan and put up at the inn was a

very tempting one. He knew little of the Highlands, and would have enjoyed their grand scenery and bracing air even had he not been able to put their beauties on canvas; and he thought that he could paint mountains and rivers; why not, when they present fewer difficulties than does the human face divine? And to be near Flora, to meet her in wooded glen, by gloomy tarn, on rocky hill-side, was a prospect overwhelmingly delightful.

True, he felt that he ought not to incur such an expense as the cost of living in Scotland in August. His new rooms were not cheap like those at Willow Green, and they must be furnished. He gazed about them ruefully, wondering how he would be able to fill them with sofas and chairs,

and whether, when they were filled, Flora would ever enter them.

‘What is the use of furnishing,’ he asked himself, ‘if she is not to inhabit my house? And what chance is there of her coming here? The earl will never consent to her marrying me, and she will never act in open opposition to her father. If we wait for his death, we shall probably be old people when that occurs; and as for his yielding during his life we might as well expect the moon to turn into green cheese. It is a hopeless business. And this separation is the worst part of it. There she is in Perthshire, and here am I in London; here must I remain all the summer, and there must she remain until February—unless, indeed, there should

be the autumn session of which Government is talking. Six months, probably, must pass before we meet again. I wish I could run down to Scotland. I might exceed my income by a few pounds ; that would matter little. But I can't go there on the sly, and meet her in an underhand way.'

He began pacing the empty drawing-room, beneath whose windows ran the broad Thames, suggesting thoughts of water-parties, of smooth reaches in Surrey, of shady backwaters in Berkshire, of hot, lazy mornings, and of cool, still evenings. Anywhere—Surrey or Perthshire—would be better than this dusty London.

Vereker went back to his dull studio, from whence he could see nothing but

the pale sky, and wrote a long letter to Flora. A few extracts from it will be sufficient to show its tenor :

‘ Nothing would be more delightful than to spend a fortnight at Strathtartan, seeing you in the midst of natural beauties, a Lady of the Lake, or a Spirit of the Glen, or something of that kind. The only thing that deters me from coming is the fear of seeming to do what is underhand. Of course, the inn is open to me as to any other traveller ; but I should go there solely to see you, and your parents must know beforehand that I am coming. Suppose, my dearest, that you were to mention to Lady Lillebonne that I think of making a holiday trip to Strathtartan. If

she makes no special objection I will come, and perhaps I will come even if she does make an objection. But I will not have anyone say that I go there to meet you clandestinely. Honest opposition to your parents on my part, and dogged patience on yours, are legitimate weapons, but deception is a hidden dagger which I will never use. I am sure that you will think with me.'

Naturally, Flora thought like Felix; her lover's opinions were hers; and, in this case, her own frank nature made her hate the very thought of deceit and deception. If Felix came to Strathtartan, he must come openly and meet her openly, if not with her parents' consent, at least

with their knowledge. Flora felt that she might bring herself to disobey, but not to deceive. So she took Vereker's letter in her hand and went to speak with her father.

The Castle was a very different place when the owner and his family were residing in it from what it was when only the factor and his wife occupied it. Then it was still, and lonely, and dreary ; now it was bright and full of sound. The retinue of servants which had come from town made Strathtartan cheerful ; and the guests from near and from far, the neighbours calling, the tenants paying their respects, all the life and stir which accompany a large household, were enough to scare away any ghost who might linger

within the walls. Mrs. Maclaren sighed when she sat down in her tiny rooms in the riverside cottage, and wished that she could mingle in the gay throngs which crowded the saloons of the Castle.

Not that the throngs were very thick or very gay. Lady Lillebonne was not great at entertaining; the earl was too shy and nervous to care for visitors; Clara was cross and out of spirits; Flora only wished for one guest. She took his letter and showed it to her father, who was in a small room called the study, and given up to rods and flies and guns.

The girl's task was a difficult one. She approached it tremblingly.

'I have had a letter this morning from London,' she began; 'it is from Mr.

Vereker. He wishes me to know that he thinks of coming to Scotland.'

'Mr. Vereker's movements are a matter of supreme indifference to me,' said the earl, stiffly.

'He thinks of coming to the inn.'

'The inn is open to him, provided he can pay his bill.'

'But—but, my dear father, if he comes here I shall see him.'

'I presume that he would come here for the purpose of seeing you. I also presume that your conduct in the matter would be such as becomes my daughter. Come in, Maclaren ; I am ready for you.'

Mr. Maclaren held the door open while Flora meekly walked out. What could she write to Felix ? If he were here, the

strain of knowing him near and of being able to do without disobedience that which would displease and grieve her parents, would be too great for her. She thought of how, at every step outside the Castle gates, she would be watching for him, how the servants and the country people would comment on her conduct, how her father would ignore him and her mother scoff at him, how unendurable all this would be for him and for her; and she wrote to him not to come. Her parents did not ask her what she had written to her lover; they sublimely affected to have forgotten his very existence. And Lord Lillebonne was once more engrossed and troubled by letters from 'Veritas,' while his wife was engrossed and delighted by the presence

of a rich American who had been brought to Strathtartan by Senlac, and who at once appeared to fall in love with Clara.

The doings of Clara Vere de Vere and of Jabez W. Fitter will not be told here. They had the effect of drawing attention from Flora. Senlac and Eustace, who occasionally appeared on the scene, organised shooting-parties. Things went on quietly for a time, though the earl wore an anxious look.

‘Veritas’ was again pressing for money. Lillebonne had not replied to two letters which demanded large sums and threatened ruin. A third letter then arrived, in which Tothill declared that, unless one hundred pounds was sent immediately, he would track the impostor to his lair, and

pull his false coronet from his shameless brows. The anonymous 'Veritas' was growing bolder in his demands; success had strengthened him. He had grown to believe in his own assertions.

Lord Lillebonne again felt impelled to take Clara into his confidence, though he knew that he had been very wrong when he had let her creep into it before. She told him that she was too busy with her own affairs to attend to his.

'Surely you can settle the impostor by yourself, or by your lawyer. I believe Mr. Maclaren would get rid of him for you.'

'I would not for the world let Mr. Maclaren know about him.'

'Don't you think Maclaren knows every-

thing already? Or set Senlac to work. He could cope with "Veritas."

'Senlac thinks of nothing but amusing himself,' sighed the earl; 'and Eustace is a mere boy, and knows nothing of the family secret.'

'Well, I am going to ride with Senlac and Mr. Fitter, and I can stay here no longer.'

Clara went away, and the earl re-read Tothill's last letter. The scoundrel talked of coming down to Strathtartan and of making an *esclandre* in the de Veres' own country. That must be prevented at any rate. What would a wealthy American think of such an affair in connection with an English peer? It would be a good thing if Clara could be married before any

fresh stories were divulged. Why had Flora pitched upon a poor American rather than a rich one? How crossly everything always goes in life! The unhappy Lillebonne sat down and wrote a letter, saying that on condition of 'Veritas' not showing himself at Strathtartan a ten-pound note was enclosed. Three days later Tothill arrived in the village.

It is not likely that the author now fallen so low, the man of talent become a cheat and rogue, had any very definite plan when he took up his abode at the village inn. The Highlands were very pleasant in August; Mrs. Maclaren would be hospitable; the earl would be a mine of wealth. It would be delightful to roam in the valleys or stride over the heather

during the day, and to drop in at the factor's house for lunch or dinner as might best suit. And it would be extremely profitable to come face to face with Lord Lillebonne, and to terrorise him into pouring out his wealth at the feet of the redoubtable 'Veritas.'

It was a lovely evening when Augustus Tothill arrived at Strathtartan; the lingering daylight of the north was still softly bright over the hills, and a young moon, following the sun down into the deep west, lengthened the summer twilight. After a light supper, Tothill went out, and passed through the public gates of Lord Lillebonne's property, and strolled along beside the stream. The water gurgled and chuckled amongst its boulders and pebbles;

the trees threw dark fantastic shadows ; presently he came to a place from whence, across the river, and up a glade, he saw the Castle broad and grand, many windows lighted from within, and sounds of voices and music coming in bursts on the still air. Mr. Fitter had a big bass organ, and was fond of singing ; Lady Clara played his accompaniments. Tothill heard the voice and the piano.

He went on a little further along the moss-grown path chequered by the light which dripped between the leafy trees ; on his right stood a small grey house surrounded by a little garden full of roses. This he guessed to be the factor's cottage, very damp in winter, but delicious in summer. This was the abode of the ele-

gant and fashionable Mrs. Maclaren, who might prove a valuable acquaintance, provided only her husband did not step in and spoil matters. Tothill did not wish the lady to see him this evening. He retraced his steps on tiptoe, and went back to the inn, where he debated with himself how he should open this new campaign.

He thought that he would not write again. Here, on the spot, a personal interview would be effective. Demand some large sum, say a thousand in round numbers. The earl tears his hair and refuses. Say that you are ready to produce the real man—describe Vereker, or Coleman, or the P.A.G.—either of them will answer your purpose—threaten to bring the real man on the scene. That will terrify your

trembling earl, and he will buy you off at any price that you may like to name.

This plan was considered and matured by Tothill. He did not think that Vereker, or Coleman, or the P.A.G. would consent to personate an imaginary rival owner of Strathtartan and Mont Veraye, but there were plenty of blackguards in England and in Scotland too, who would do so if they were paid for it. And he must trust in part to the inspiration of the moment. All that he wanted was money; a thousand, five hundred, would suffice; with five hundred pounds in his pocket, Augustus Tothill would be able to afford to sit down and write that three-volume novel which was to take the world by storm some day.

It was not until the following Sunday

that the adventurer was able to put his project in execution. There was a little oratory in the Castle in which any Anglican clergyman staying in the neighbourhood was welcome to conduct Divine Service on Sunday. A stray parson said morning prayer at half-past ten. Lord and Lady Lillebonne, their sons and daughters, and English servants, Mr. Jabez W. Fitter, Mrs. Maclaren, who thought the Church of England more ladylike than the Kirk, and a few other persons, composed the congregation. Just before the sermon Tothill went into the little building. Sinfield was surprised to see that the stranger knew his way about the Castle, and no one prevented him from joining in the semi-public worship.

Mrs. Maclaren recognised him, notwithstanding his brand-new chimney-pot hat, his two-button tan gloves, his white satin scarf, his white spats, his hem-stitched handkerchief. She recognised him as the charming and polite stranger to whom her husband had been so rude.

‘I am *so* delighted to see you!’ she exclaimed after service, when some of the congregation passed out by a side-door into the garden; ‘is our Strathtartan so picturesque that you are compelled to return to it?’

Tothill looked at Mrs. Maclaren in her trailing silk gown and her bonnet with huge feathers; even to his eye she seemed a travesty of fashion.

‘Yes,’ he said, slowly, ‘yes; it is a

lovely place. Whoever has been here once must wish to come again. But I am here more on business than on pleasure.'

They had crossed a foot-bridge over the stream, and were now going along the path towards the factor's cottage.

'Oh, but we have our pleasures and gaieties here,' said the lady; 'now that the dear earl and his family are among us, we shall have sports, and gatherings, and shooting-parties. I assure you we are not quite out of the world of fashion.'

'The world of fashion must always include Mrs. Maclaren,' said Tothill, clumsily, thinking how he could get away from her.

He was afraid that she was about to invite him to lunch with her; but the broad figure of her husband among the roses of

his garden put an end to any such intention if she entertained it.

‘Oh, you flatterer!’ giggled the lady; then holding out her hand, she added, ‘I am afraid I must go in now, as my husband may want me to look round the garden with him.’

Tothill raised his hat with much elaboration, and retraced his steps along the riverbank.

He had not gone far when he saw Lord Lillebonne approaching, accompanied by Mr. Fitter. The earl had got into a rough coat and a low hat, and was taking a walk between church and luncheon.

‘Now,’ said Tothill to himself, ‘is my opportunity. I don’t quite know how I shall manage it, but I must attack him

and not leave him until I have brought him to book.'

A few paces further, and he was face to face with Lillebonne. He halted and stared at his victim, and barred the way. The earl grew red when he found himself stopped on his own ground.

'Allow us to pass, if you please.'

'No,' said Tothill; 'not so. We have met at last. I am "Veritas."'

Lillebonne began to tremble nervously.

'I wrote to you; I have nothing more to say.'

'But I have much to say to you, Mr. de Vere.'

At this address, Jabez W. Fitter, a tall, thin, gentlemanlike man, felt deeply interested, and stood by with a keen smile. He

might find himself assisting at a comedy, or even at a tragedy.

‘Yes, I have much to say, much in substance, though not in bulk. I know so much about you, Mr. de Vere, that I shall be obliged to speak unless you show me good reason why I should be silent.’

Lord Lillebonne again tried to pass; but Tothill said,

‘Ah, you are afraid.’

The de Vere blood coursed through the earl’s veins, and he replied,

‘Do your worst!’

Tothill grew bolder. He said to the American,

‘Perhaps you would be kind enough to walk on; it is on private matters that I wish to speak to his lordship.’

Mr. Fitter carried a thick stick, which he now eyed without budging.

‘ Oh, you need not fear that I shall attack his lordship in any way that would do him bodily harm. That is not at all my plan. I can torture his mind, which will suit me better.’

‘ Walk on, if you please, Mr. Fitter,’ said Lillebonne.

The American walked on until he was out of earshot, and then sat down on a large stone, from whence he could see the disputants. He thought that Tothill was a lunatic.

‘ My lord,’ said the author, ‘ you know as well as I do that you are not the Earl of Lillebonne.’

‘ I do not know it.’

‘Well, put it this way: you do not know that you *are* the Earl of Lillebonne.’

‘It was settled by the House of Lords, long ago. I am the earl.’

‘Now, see here,’ said Tothill, in a coaxing tone; ‘your great-grandfather had three sons, had he not?’

‘No one denies it.’

‘He was succeeded by his eldest son, who had one only son, Francis, who was killed in a duel with his cousin Charles.’

‘A very sad affair,’ said Lillebonne, as we shall continue to call him; ‘duelling was the curse of those days.’

‘This cousin Charles was the only surviving son of Charles de Vere, your great-uncle. After the duel this young Charles

disappeared, it being understood that he retired to the Continent.'

'He was never afterwards heard of.'

'Exactly. Your grandfather, Henry Edwin, then became heir presumptive to his brother; but died before his father. His son, your father, succeeded his grandfather. Do I make it clear?'

'It is not new to me,' said Lillebonne, with dignity.

'And you succeeded your father?'

'My succession has never been disputed.'

'Quite so. But if that Charles who escaped to the Continent had left descendants they would be the heirs, not you and yours.'

'Everything possible was done to dis-

cover whether he had left descendants, and when no one came forward the House of Lords allowed my father's petition.'

'Quite so,' said Tothill again, 'but, Mr. de Vere—' here the author suddenly decided on a bold stroke of fiction—'that Charles did leave descendants.'

'How do you know?' cried the earl, in tones so shrill that they reached Fitter's ears and made him look up from the amber stream.

'*How* I know is my secret. It is a secret, Mr. de Vere, worth money, worth a thousand pounds. If I make my knowledge public, you will be ignominiously cast down from your high position; your title, your wealth, your position will depart from you; you and your wife and

your children will become mere nobodies ; you may have to work for your living.'

Lillebonne was paler than ever. Yes, to lose his title and income would be an awful blow, and a blow to his wife and children which they could never recover. Yet, after all, there was nothing but the mere assertion of a vulgar stranger.

'Proof will be required, sir,' said the earl.

'And proof you shall have.'

'If,' said Lord Lillebonne, 'it should be proved that I am not the lawful earl, I shall resign my false position without protest, though it will be a heavy blow to me.'

He ended with a gasp.

'I am sorry for you,' said Tothill, a

little touched; 'but, as I told you, I can square the other people for a thousand pounds.'

'I have no wish to "square" people out of their rights,' said the earl, with spirit; 'and those rights I shall not believe in until you show me the proofs.'

For a moment the scoundrel was staggered; then he thought, 'As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,' and he said, defiantly,

'Perhaps, sir, you will believe when I produce the real man.'

'I will,' said the other.

Tothill burst into a coarse peal of laughter.

Lord Lillebonne turned and walked homewards. Tothill dashed through the

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bracken and undergrowth in the direction of the gate leading to the public road. Mr. Fitter was idly musing of Lady Clara and gazing on the amber of the stream. When he looked up neither his host nor the stranger was visible, so he made his way back to the Castle, being ready for his lunch.

CHAPTER XXV.

PUTTING UP THE BANNES.

Why are we weighed upon with heaviness,
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest : why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown?

TENNYSON.

It is understood, of course, that Lady
Flora de Vere knew nothing of the family
secret, beyond the fact that, as all the
world knew, there *was* a family secret.

When she turned over the 'Peerage' and came to the name of the Earl of Lillebonne, she read that some great-great uncle Francis, or other relative of hers, had been killed in a duel ; she also read that another by-gone relative had been named Charles, but it was not said that he married or left children or died. These gaps in the de Vere archives did not show as difficulties to Flora, who was young and wrapped up in the present ; she hardly heeded them. It never occurred to her that her father's nervousness and low spirits could be connected with the Francis and Charles long since dead and gone. Nor did she connect the shabby-genteel man, who suddenly appeared at Strathtartan, with her father's nervousness and low spirits.

Therefore it was that though she heard of Tothill, and even saw him once or twice, she did not allude to him in her letters to Felix Vereker.

Vereker, very lonely in his flat, never thought of Tothill ; at this time he thought a great deal about Harry Coleman.

Coleman had sole possession of the rooms at Willow Green. He had furnished them after a fashion, not after *the* fashion, having bought odds and ends at various dealers' shops in the neighbourhood.

'Come and see the old place,' he said to Felix, and Felix went and saw. Tables and chairs, odd brackets, quaint lamps, strange footstools, extraordinary boxes, all were jumbled together without regard to

style or date, but the *ensemble* was pleasing enough.

‘How do you like it?’ Coleman asked.

‘Oh, well enough.’

‘I daresay it would not do for your Lady Flora, but for my little Edith it is the very thing.’

‘I only wish,’ said Vereker, ‘that I had as much to offer my Flora. You are a happier man than I, Coleman.’

‘I don’t know, Edith is delicate. And her mother is making difficulties; says the girl is too young; says she can’t spare her; says all sorts of foolish things.’

‘I am afraid they are a delicate family.’

‘All the more reason,’ said Coleman, looking lovingly on his chairs, and lamps,

and *bric-à-brac*, 'why she should be brought among more comfortable surroundings. And surely a girl should not wait until she is an old woman before beginning true happiness ; and Mrs. Crane can spare her, for there is Nellie growing up.'

'Yes, old fellow,' said Felix, with a quiet smile, 'there is every reason why you and your Edith should be married at once. Just as there is every reason why I and my Flora must wait for ever.'

'Have you seen Edith lately?' Harry inquired, with a certain tone of anxiety which did not escape Vereker.

'No, not very recently.'

'Come with me and call on the Cranes. Will you?'

‘With pleasure.’

‘Come on Sunday ; that is their leisure day.’

‘By all means,’ said Felix ; and the visit was arranged for the following Sunday afternoon ; which Sunday was the same day on which Tothill had begun his attack on Lord Lillebonne.

A hot, dusty day in London ; an opaque, yellow-grey sky ; a parched atmosphere ; baked pavements ; scraps of papers were blown by a warm breeze along unwatered streets ; men lounged out-of-doors in their shirt-sleeves ; women and girls took off their bonnets ; children fell asleep in the general lassitude.

It was not cool in the Cranes’ small apartments. But Felix Vereker hardly

noticed the physical state of the room, his thoughts being taken up by the appearance of Edith. She looked absolutely beautiful. Her complexion was brilliantly white and pink; her eyes glittered; her teeth were luminous like pearls; but her figure was thin and shrunken, there was no chest; her hands were almost transparent; her voice was tremulous and hollow. Since Felix last saw her, a fearful change had come over her. He could not doubt that she was rapidly—most rapidly—following her father to the grave.

Coleman tried not to perceive the girl's condition. He laughed and joked and talked about his 'high-art' rooms, and about Edith's great housekeeperly qualities; she responded with an excitement

of manner which Felix had never noticed in her before. He saw the wonderful increase of beauty and was impressed by it, but was much more impressed by the wonderful increase of disease. Harry shut his eyes to the disease and saw only the beauty. Mrs. Crane could not conceal her anxious tenderness for her lovely daughter.

. But no one speaks outright what they think on such matters. It would have been brutal of Vereker to say to his friend that plainly Edith was dying. Nor even could the mother give utterance to her tender anxiety. They all talked and joked together as if life stretched before them, long and bright.

‘ Well, Mr. Vereker, and so I hear from

Harry that you are thinking of taking a wife.'

'Yes, Mrs. Crane, a certain lady has promised to be my wife; but there are great difficulties in the shape of a stern father and mother.'

'Ah, yes, to be sure,' said the widow; 'I don't suppose the earl and countess would quite like it. They would want their daughters to marry rich noblemen. Has Lady Flora grown up pretty? She was a sweet child when I lived with them. Lady Clara was handsomer, but not so amiable.'

'Lady Flora is pretty and amiable,' replied Felix; he did not wish to discuss her. 'Lady Clara is not a pleasant young woman.'

‘By-the-by, Mrs. Crane,’ said Harry, ‘do you know anything against the earl? That fellow Tothill declares that there is some secret about him which, when discovered, will ruin him.’

‘I know nothing,’ replied Mrs. Crane, ‘except what I heard from the head-nurse, and what she heard in the housekeeper’s room. They said that the earl was not really the earl, and that some day the real man would turn up.’

‘Then that is what Tothill is after!’ exclaimed Felix; ‘I see now what he means by those abusive articles in the *Monday Moon* and other papers. I hope he will not succeed in ruining the earl.’

‘Only the real earl could do that,’ said Mrs. Crane.

‘ And you ought to be very glad at the prospect of the earl being pulled down from his high estate.’

‘ Why?’ said Felix, turning sharply on Coleman.

‘ Because if he were ruined, no longer Earl of Lillebonne, but an impostor unmasked, then he would be only too thankful to get his daughter married to a rising young artist like yourself.’

Felix looked grave. He was not unused to Coleman’s blunt discussions of his friend’s affairs, but he did not quite like to hear Flora’s future talked of in this off-hand manner. And the idea suggested was a complex one. If Lord Lillebonne were proved an impostor he would be glad, as Harry said, to get his daughter

respectably married; but then could Felix make capital out of the father's degradation wherewith to secure the daughter? Could he come down upon the old man and say, 'You can't refuse your daughter to me now that you are disgraced;' and yet he must step forward, if anything of the kind occurred, and show that he loved Flora, not for rank or wealth or any worldly advantage, but for her own dear self. All these thoughts passed vaguely through Vereker's mind as he sat in Mrs. Crane's little hot room, and he felt an undefined fear that the contemptible Tothill would somehow work mischief.

The conversation languished. Lovers are dull company to other people. Felix had been gazing on, without seeing, the

face of Edith Crane now blanched to a deathly white. He forgot his own troubles and remembered those of Coleman.

‘She should go away to the sea,’ said Felix to Harry, suddenly,

‘Why? there is nothing the matter with her.’

‘I’m all right,’ said Edith, gaily, ‘I am going to settle mother in a parlour where she can do better with the dressmaking; and Nellie is to learn the trade.’

‘I understand it pretty well already,’ said Nellie.

‘Do you?’ interposed Arthur; ‘why, you never even got into the sixth standard.’

‘Lor!’ said Nellie; ‘whatever has school got to do with dressmaking?’

Arthur subsided.

‘Should you like to go to the sea?’ Felix asked of Edith.

‘I don’t know. When mother is settled, perhaps.’

‘We’ll go there for our honeymoon,’ said Harry.

‘You don’t know that you’ll have a honeymoon,’ laughed Edith; ‘perhaps it will be made of green cheese!’

They all laughed; Mrs. Crane forcedly, and Vereker without a smile. He was oppressed by what seemed to him the ghastly merriment of a girl who was marked as the bride of death. He rose to leave.

‘Won’t you stay and have a cup of tea?’ said the widow.

‘Thanks, I think not. I believe I must go.’

‘Why? You’re not busy on Sunday.’

‘I have letters to write,’ said Felix.

Then they shook him heartily by the hand all round and let him depart. As he went he said to Coleman,

‘Come with me a moment, I have something to say.’

Coleman followed him into the street.

‘My dear Harry,’ he began, ‘don’t you see—I am so sorry——’

‘What?’ cried Harry, irritably.

‘That lovely girl; oh, Harry, she is very, very ill.’

‘She is not,’ answered Coleman; ‘she was looking brilliant when we went in.’

‘She is very ill,’ said Felix again.

‘And what if she is?’ the other demanded, fiercely.

‘You talk of marrying——’

‘And more than talk.’

Felix shook his head.

‘Would you desert your Flora because her father is an impostor? And would you have me desert my Edith because she is ill? I’d have you to know, Mr. Vereker, that I am not a scoundrel.’

‘My dear Coleman,’ said Vereker, calmly, ‘I am only thinking that the grief will be overpowering for you. She will not live to be married. You must face that fact.’

‘She shall live to be married!’ cried Coleman.

Felix again shook his head.

‘I don’t think she will live three months.’

‘We will be married within one month.’

Felix only looked at him.

‘We will be married at once. I will give her all that care and love can give. I’ll take her to the sea. She shall see Dr. Williams. I’ll feed her and keep her warm with furs and fires. If we can’t have a long life together, we’ll have a short one. She shall be happy as long or as short as she lives.’

He turned away abruptly and went back to Mrs. Crane’s room. He sat down beside Edith and said to her,

‘I shall go to-morrow and arrange for our banns to be asked on Sunday next.

And to-morrow three weeks shall be our wedding-day.'

Edith's face flushed crimson, she put her head back and gasped for breath. Harry thought she was dying. He stood beside her in mute and awful suspense while her mother fanned her with a newspaper and her sister sponged her temples with cold water. Presently she smiled, and said,

'Harry, you startled me; do you really mean it?'

'Yes, my darling, if you will consent.'

'Would it be better to wait until I feel better? I shall be stronger in the cooler weather.'

Mrs. Crane thought of her husband, and knew that Edith would never be stronger.

‘It will be cooler three weeks hence,’ said Coleman, ‘and we will go to the sea-side, as I said before. Folkestone is very bracing.’

‘How nice!’ said Edith, reviving; ‘but there will be so much to do. I must get my *trousseau*. And, mother, darling mother, do you think you will be able to do without me?’

‘I must learn to do without you,’ said Mrs. Crane; and then her pent-up agitation burst its bounds, and she sobbed unrestrainedly. She must do without Edith!

Nellie began to cry, and Arthur gave a howl. Coleman felt he was choking. He must go.

‘I won’t stay for tea, Mrs. Crane; I’ll

go at once to your vicar, or beadle, or somebody, and try if the banns can be asked this evening. I think that can be done. At all events, we will lose no more time ; we have lost too much already.'

He stooped over Edith and caught her in his arms, pressing her slight form to him with an embrace strong as death, and kissing her lips as if he feared he might never do so again. It was more like an eternal adieu than a mere *au revoir*. Edith wondered why he was so demonstrative ; but Mrs. Crane knew what was in his mind.

She went with him out into Little Long Street, and said,

' Harry Coleman, do you know what you are doing ?'

‘Yes,’ he replied; ‘I am marrying a dying girl.’

‘Remember, that I do not ask you to do it. If you were my son I should say that you were stark staring mad.’

‘Perhaps so,’ returned Harry; ‘but I mean to make her happy for the short time which remains. Don’t argue, don’t talk, it is waste of breath. Keep her up until the wedding-day; after that I will tend her until her dying day.’

The widow cried with a subdued grief.

‘Like her father! Like my Joe! Oh, it is a sad world, it is a cruel life! Why are my children fated to early death when other people’s brats are strong and hearty? Don’t they deserve a long life? Don’t I

deserve some comfort and happiness? There, go along with you; you're a good man, but you can't save her, no, nor all the doctors in Christendom.'

Coleman had no heart to enter on the subject of heredity; he wrung Mrs. Crane's hand, and went away down the street towards the district church of St. Oswald. He found the vestry-door ajar, and within it the vergers just about to light the gas and prepare for evening service. The sky was very dark and threatened a storm.

'Well, no,' said the portly official; 'I don't think as how the vicar could ast the banns to-night even if he was so minded. We don't put up banns until we have made enquiries about the parties. And if you'll

look at the prayer-book you'll see that they mayn't be ast of a evening, unless so be as there's no morning service. You are in a hurry to get married, it seems, but afterwards you can't get unmarried in a hurry.'

'I am in a hurry,' said Coleman, not heeding the verger's implied jeer at the holy estate of matrimony; 'because the lady is very ill.'

'Very ill?'

'Yes, dying.'

'Lor bless me! You going to marry a dying woman?'

'Yes,' said Harry; 'now, get on with the banns as quick as you can. What is the fee? Make your enquiries. We must have the wedding to-morrow three weeks.'

The verger was astounded into silence ; he wrote down names and addresses, and did all the necessary business without a remark ; but when Coleman had gone his way, there burst a whistle from the official lips, and an exclamation of,

‘ A dying woman, lor bless me !’

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WEDDING.

In that it is thy marriage-day
Is music more than any song.

TENNYSON.

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not :
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught :
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.
SHELLEY.

WE are generally wise for others and
foolish for ourselves. We can give good

advice, but we cannot follow it. Felix Vereker thought it the height of folly for Harry Coleman to marry a dying girl, but had he been in Harry's place he would have done the same. Coleman considered Vereker an utter idiot for persisting in wishing to marry a woman much above him in rank; but had he been in Vereker's place he would have done the same. In both men there was a strain of chivalry none too common in these days, though commoner than some people think, which prompted them to love once and to love well, and to be loyal to this love through every difficulty, whether of sickness and poverty, or of scorn and pride. And though Felix shook his head at Harry's folly, he sympathised with it, and though

Harry scoffed at Vereker's idiocy, he admired it.

One evening Coleman appeared in Vereker's room. It was a damp, dull evening, and Felix was sitting in the studio in front of a fire. With him, in deep consultation, was Mrs. Moods the charwoman. Her eldest boy had hurt his leg, and wanted some appliance from the Surgical Aid Society, and she was going round among her 'gentlemen' to try to collect enough 'letters' to procure the appliance. When she saw Felix sitting alone and melancholy, she began to joke him mildly on the necessity of his getting a wife; and he, more seriously, entered on the subject of household expenses.

'Which I say,' continued Mrs. Moods,

when she had ushered in Coleman, and had also rubbed her face with her handkerchief, 'that all these empty rooms is that dreary that I wonder Mr. Vereker don't take a leap into the river. What do you say, sir?' she appealed to the visitor.

'I should advise that leap,' replied Coleman, 'if he wanted a mermaid or a mudmaid for a wife. But, as Mr. Vereker's young woman happens to be in Scotland, I should recommend the "Flying Scotsman."'

'Mrs. Moods has been calculating what the expenses for two would come to,' said Felix, stirring the fire; 'she says that two would cost more than double one, though I can't see why. She says that my rough way of living would not do for a young

lady. I suppose we might begin on three hundred a-year, if we were sure of that income.'

'*We* shall begin on much less.'

'Yes?'

'But then Edith Crane is not an earl's daughter.'

'And are you a-going to be married too, sir?' cried Mrs. Moods, with a sneeze, and a countenance puckered with interest; 'now, if Mr. Vereker could be married on the same day! Dr. Denham on the first floor is hengaged, and hexpecks to be married about Christmas. If all my gentlemen get married, whatever shall I do?'

'Get married yourself,' said Coleman.

'No, thank you,' said the charwoman,

with sudden coolness; 'once is enough for me, or for any woman who has had one that drank. Is there anything more I can do for you, Mr. Vereker? Poached eggs for breakfast. Good-night, gentlemen both.'

She retired quietly, and the friends lighted their pipes and sat on till late in the night. Felix had little to tell. Flora wrote that Mr. Tothill, the very odd man staying at the inn, was still hanging about; but she did not know what he wanted from her father—money probably.

'You see, Flora has, probably, never seen the *Monday Moon* or any papers of that kind, in which personalities are prominent,' said Felix.

‘No, she would not be likely to do so. Vereker, my banns are put up.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. And does the wedding really come off on that Monday?’

‘Yes. I say, old man, I want you to do me a favour.’

‘What, give away the bride?’

‘No. Her uncle, Mr. Crane’s brother, who keeps a dairy at Hampstead, is going to act father. Poor Joe! I wish he could be with us. Will you be my best man?’

Felix nodded.

‘I’ll give you more particulars later on. Edith is very happy.’

‘Poor child!’

‘I know,’ said Harry, in a low voice,

as he sat in the dark, 'I know that her happiness can last but a short time, I know it as well as you do. But I will make her happy to the end. I'll wait on her and slave for her to the last. My beautiful Edith !'

When Harry spoke again, it was on matters of art ; this summer time the two young men were spending idly in London, both feeling that they were wasting the long days, and yet unable to do otherwise.

'I can't afford myself a holiday,' said Vereker, 'just as I have entered on this expensive flat.'

There was no need for Coleman to explain why he could take no run into the country for longer than a day, or to

a greater distance than a few miles from town. He proposed a 'one man show' for himself in the spring, and of this he talked chiefly until he left Vereker's room.

'You won't forget,' he said, as he was leaving.

'Forget!' said Felix.

It pleased Vereker very much to send to the attic at Willow Green, all sorts of things which he thought would afford comfort to Edith. Some new kind of couch, an eider-down quilt, a stove which would burn all night, elastic pillows, a chair in which she could be carried, these were among his wedding-presents. Edith did not see them, for they went direct to Willow Green; but she heard of them,

and was pathetically grateful. Each time that Felix saw her, he noticed a further advance of disease. He was deeply grieved for Harry Coleman. Nothing could be sadder than a wedding as a preliminary to a funeral; to make the girl his wife, and to lay her in her grave a few weeks later, was a terrible prospect for Harry. All Vereker's own troubles dwindled to nothing when he thought of his friend's future; what Flora wrote about the annoyance of a vulgar intruder dogging her father's footsteps seemed to Felix puerile gossip when he glanced from her letter to the beautiful etherealised face of Edith Crane. Flora, healthy and plump, would look vulgar beside that exquisite Edith; yet he thanked God with

all his heart that Flora was healthy and even robust.

The wedding-day dawned. Felix dressed himself as gaily as he could, and went early to Willow Green to see that everything there was in proper order. He re-arranged the furniture, decanted wine, put tea into the caddy, laid the studio-fire, hung a curtain across the door, and trimmed one of Harry's elegant lamps. He ascertained from Mrs. Quekett that there was a leg of lamb, mint sauce, plum tart and custard, prepared for the supper of the bride and bridegroom.

‘ Though it's little she'll eat of anything more in this world,’ said Mrs. Quekett; ‘ I see her the other day when I was going along Little Long Street, and she was

carrying of a parcel, poor dear. "It's a sin and a shame," says I, "for her mother to let her get married, just to bring trouble on the head of that poor young man." Mark my words, Mr. Vereker, she'll keep up for a day or two, then she'll run down all of a sudden, and she'll take to her bed, and she'll be buried before the month's out. Oh, I've seen 'em go off awful quick.'

'Yes,' said Quekett, who was also in attendance with a napkin on his arm like a waiter, 'they always go off awful quick.'

'Except when they linger on year after year, dying by inches. There's many of these consumptive patients as last on a wonderful time—now a bit better, now a

bit worse ; making you think they might grow strong, and then making you think they can't get through the night. I've known 'em live on ten—twenty—years.'

'Yes,' said Quekett, to whom his wife appealed, 'they always live on ten—twenty—years.'

It made Vereker's heart ache to hear gentle Edith Crane's chance of life discussed thus calmly. He went into the bed-room, where he found Harry in front of the looking-glass, much perplexed over the arranging of a double white petunia in his button-hole. Felix wore a red, red rose.

'I think we should be going,' said Felix.

Coleman turned to him a face which expressed much graver anxiety than any which could be concerned with a flower.

‘Give me your good wishes,’ he said, huskily.

‘God bless you,’ said Felix, deeply moved; ‘one can’t find much to say on these occasions: it is your wedding-day, and I pray God to bless you.’

‘That is enough,’ said Coleman; and they went down and hailed a hansom.

It had got wind that Mr. Coleman was to be married this morning, and many of the other residents at the Studios peeped out of their doors and windows at the bridegroom and his best man. They thought that both looked very solemn,

considering that a wedding is usually a joyful event; they also thought the best man much handsomer than the bridegroom.

At the church the young men found the portly verger, more consequential than ever. Some of Edith's girl-friends were seated in the pews giggling together. No one else was there until the vicar arrived, hurried and hot. He said, in a low tone to Felix,

'I hope the bride will be punctual. I shall give a very short address, because there is a funeral immediately afterwards. You had better get all your party out through the vestry.'

Felix assented; and presently a couple of cabs drove up, containing the bride

with her mother and uncle, and Nellie with Arthur and the aunt. Immediately began the service; quickly, though not irreverently, the vicar and vergers helped the contracting parties through it. Within a quarter-of-an-hour Henry and Edith were man and wife.

Felix led his little party into the vestry. He then saw that the bride was looking lovely, with a bright yet soft flush on her cheeks, with eyes humid and full of dark light. She was in a pale-blue cashmere frock, with a little white bonnet and veil. She seemed childlike in her delicate beauty, and womanly in her smiling quietude. There was no excitement or nervousness about her; it was the bridegroom who was nervous. She glanced up

in his face, and leaned on his arm with a touching confidence. In the vestry Mrs. Crane began to cry, as did Nellie, and the dairyman's wife.

‘Sign your maiden name,’ whispered Felix to Mrs. Coleman.

She did so, and it was witnessed. Felix paid the fees to the vergers, who hurried back into the church, where the vicar was awaiting the funeral, which was to be semi-choral. The giggling girls remained for it, giggling no more, but snivelling, as was right.

‘We will go out this way,’ said Felix, going to the door of the vestry which opened into a side street. There a fly with a gaily decorated horse was awaiting them.

Harry and Edith climbed into this ponderous and shabby landau; at the same moment a coffin was carried in by the west door of the church, and the 'Dead March in Saul' sounded in the ears of the bridal party. Harry shuddered. Edith heard nothing, for as she sank back in the carriage a faintness overcame her, and she was unconscious for a few moments. The rest of the bridal party failed to recognise the air played on the organ. The dairy-man said,

'I did not know you was going to have music performed for Hedith.'

They got back to the rooms occupied by Mrs. Crane. A neighbour had lent them another room, the second-floor front, in which a luncheon was laid: cold fowl,

salad, cherry-tart, gooseberries, and pears. No one had much appetite except the dairyman and Arthur. Conversation was slack. No healths were proposed. The proceedings would have been exceedingly tame, not to say depressing, had not the dairyman brought his concertina, on which he played a selection of popular tunes, winding up with the National Anthem. After that, everyone felt that the day was practically over.

The newly-married couple was—or were—escorted down to the street and placed in the rickety landau which had returned for them. Arthur threw half-a-pound of rice, and Mrs. Dairyman an old black satin shoe which had belonged to her mother. The landau was driven away; the party

left behind shook hands all round and uttered many good wishes for Mr. and Mrs. Coleman. But the adieux ended in a howl of weeping from the women, and the men took refuge in their handkerchiefs. It had been a strange, sad wedding. Edith had been the only person calm and self-possessed, for even Coleman had been painfully nervous.

As Felix walked slowly away, intending to dine once more at the river-side tavern, his pity for his friend mingled and blended with pity for himself, and wonder as to whether the sun would ever rise on his wedding-day. He felt very hopeless on the subject, not seeing how he could, within the next twenty years, make for himself a position which Lord Lillebonne

would think worthy of Flora. If by any extraordinary chance—and the improbable is always the probable—it should be proved that the present earl was not the real man, then this unhappy and involuntary impostor might become willing for his daughter to marry a respectable young man who could provide her with bread-and-butter. But this possibility was very remote, and not one to be wished for.

Vereker's thoughts were gloomy ; to see his friend married under such melancholy circumstances was sadly depressing ; the 'Dead March' still rung in his ears ; he had no pleasant prospect for himself. He walked towards the old river-side eating-house with his eyes on the ground, and his heart heavy. Then he noticed that

the rose in his button-hole was utterly faded. He pulled it out, and flung it into the middle of the road, from which a ragged little girl rescued it, rejoicing as if she had secured a great treasure.

Felix smiled at the child, so easily and cheaply pleased. His eye wandered from her to another child on the pavement who was laboriously spelling over the posters outside a little news-shop. One poster in particular deserved attention; it announced in large type :

THE EARL AND THE AUTHOR.

ASSAULT BY AN EARL ON AN AUTHOR.

Felix instantly thought of Lord Lillebonne and Tothill. He went into the news-shop and bought an evening paper,

which he opened while waiting for his dinner.

Yes, the earl was Lillebonne, the author was Tothill; this was the story:

‘An extraordinary scene was witnessed on Saturday in the little village of Strath-tartan, Perthshire. A well-known author named Augustus Tothill was walking near the gates of Strathtartan Castle, the Highland residence of the Earl of Lillebonne, when the earl himself came out through the gates. A few words passed between the two gentlemen, when suddenly the earl was seen to lift his walking-stick, with which he proceeded to strike Mr. Tothill. Two gentlemen walking at a little distance, and a lady also within call, hearing

Mr. Tothill's appeals for help, ran to his assistance. By this time the earl had ceased to strike Tothill, and had thrown his stick over a hedge. The distinguished author was not much hurt; but there is no doubt that he will bring Lord Lillebonne before the judicial authorities of Scotland.'

Felix thought he recognised Tothill's own hand in this report of the assault; no one but the 'distinguished author' himself would have called him so. But why should Lillebonne, the nervous, deprecating, gentlemanly, elderly man, assault the wretched Tothill? There must have been great provocation before the earl brought himself to condescend to this display of indignation.

Of course, Felix knew that Tothill had been threatening and blackmailing Lord Lillebonne ; but he did not know how far matters had gone, or what turn they had taken in Scotland. The 'well-known author' was such a contemptible wretch that it had hardly been worth while to suppose that he could seriously annoy the earl. But a persistent fly will often drive a man almost to the verge of desperation ; and an unclean insect like Tothill might be able to worry a peer until the unfortunate nobleman lost control of his temper and retaliated with his walking-stick. The story, as told in the evening papers, was ludicrous, but it might have an unpleasant side.

Felix mused over it while he ate his din-

ner. Few men came to dine at that quiet hostelry. When it was first known to Vereker, it had quite a *clientèle*; but now new and more showy *restaurants* drew the custom which ebbed from this place like a tide which has no return. Only a couple of guests were there this evening. They were of an undefined class, perhaps cashiers in large shops, perhaps tailors with small businesses of their own; or they might be clerks to lawyers, or drawing-masters in boys' schools. Felix looked at them with some interest, wondering feebly what their callings might be; but when they fell into conversation he listened to them.

‘This is a disgraceful affair,’ said No. 1,
‘this Earl of Lillebonne assaulting an

author. This is what our aristocracy is coming to. They can't let an honest man walk about the country without laying in to him as if he was a thieving cur.'

'Perhaps the author deserved it,' suggested the other man.

'How could he deserve it?' said No. 1; 'here's an author, and authoring is a peaceable business I'm sure, taking a walk in the country, when up comes an earl and belabours him with a stick without rhyme or reason. How would that earl like to be belaboured by that author?'

'I should not wonder,' remarked No. 2, 'if the author had made some insulting remarks to the earl, which you could not expect even an earl to listen to quietly.'

'And suppose he had? Those fellows

with titles that they have got from their grandfathers, and estates which ought to belong to the people who till the ground, deserve all the bad which anyone can say of them.'

No. 1 then rambled off into wholesale abuse of the aristocracy, while No. 2 had some severe things to say of literary men. Felix ceased to listen, and thought over this strange assault, already the common talk of London. Would Flora write him an account of it? Would her usual letter arrive next morning? What could be the meaning, and what would be the outcome of this extraordinary assault?

'No, sir,' the landlord was saying, 'I have not many customers now. I can't make show enough to attract them. And

I have not the heart or the strength to make any more efforts. I'm tired of it all, that's what I am. And so is my missus. My lease is up at Michaelmas, and I'm not going to renew it. So I don't advise you to come here any more, sir. I can't give you a good dinner now, I know very well. Living a long way off, do you say? Ah, there it is! customers go, and the business goes too. We are all going, going down hill, down the long hill into the dark. I'm seventy-three, and my missus seventy-one. We are old-fashioned people, we are, we can't keep up with new-fashioned ways. Married? Mr. Coleman married? I'm glad to hear it. I wish him well. I hope he's got a good wife.'

‘She is very nice,’ said Felix, ‘but sadly delicate.’

The landlord shook his head, and rambled on in a sort of monologue. The two democrats departed; so did Felix, from the little old tavern which he never again entered, and which was demolished in the following October.

Vereker went home, thinking at times of Harry and Edith, their recent marriage, and their approaching parting; thinking at other times of the scene between Lillebonne and Tothill, which persisted in presenting itself under a humorous aspect. Flora usually wrote to Felix on Sunday, and he sometimes received her letter on Monday evening, but more often on Tuesday morning. Here was Monday evening

and no letter from her ; almost certainly a letter would come next morning ; would it give an account of the assault, its cause and its effect ?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE AMERICAN'S PROPOSAL.

Jeder Tag
Hat seine Plag.

German Proverb.

NEXT morning there was a letter from Flora. She and Felix were not very foolish lovers ; they did not write to each other every day. Felix was quite sure that he could not fill up a daily sheet, unless it were with protestations of affec-

tion ; and such protestations would be unnecessary, because Flora knew already that he loved her. As long as he continued to love her, there was little need of letters ; when he ceased to love her, he must indeed write and say so. And Flora felt that as their engagement was likely to last a very long, an indefinitely long time, a daily correspondence must inevitably become burdensome, and she would not begin it. She generally wrote on Sunday, but not always ; and she wrote on other days if she had anything particular to say.

What she had to say on this occasion was very particular. Felix saw by her handwriting, hasty and careless, that she had written under the pressure of excite-

ment ; there were words omitted and duplicated, and it seemed to Felix that the cause of this excitement must be more serious than appeared on the surface.

‘ Yesterday morning a most extraordinary thing happened. You know how quiet and reserved my father is, and how seldom he gives way to outbreaks of excitement or temper. He went out for a walk, having to go to one of the farms to see about some repairs. He had not been gone ten minutes, when he came hurrying back, looking very red and angry. Mr. Fitter was with him also talking loudly, and Sir Charles Denham, who did not say much, but corroborated Mr. Fitter’s statements. Mrs. Maclaren, the factor’s

wife, was them. It appeared that a man who has been staying in the village named Tothill, came up to my father, and insulted him, and then my father lifted his stick and struck this Tothill across his shoulders. Mr. Fitter and Sir Charles separated them, and Mrs. Maclaren called for the police, who only come here on Sundays; and my father returned home, and the man Tothill danced in the road and shouted out that he would bring an action and make the earl pay for his assault. There is a tremendous commotion here. And I don't know what it was that Mr. Tothill said which was so insulting. I will write again soon. I *think* Mr. F. will be my brother-in-law, but do not whisper it until I give you leave.'

Felix shrugged his shoulders and thought what a mistake a man makes to lose his temper, and so put himself in the wrong. He had seen the earl peevish and irritable, but never in an aggressively passionate mood. Of course, Tothill's insult had been concerning the succession to the Lillebonne title and estates ; probably he had put his remarks and demands in an unusually offensive form, and the earl had turned upon his persecutor in a manner not warranted by the laws of the land. Felix would get a morning paper presently, and see whether any more details had come to hand.

There were certain details concerning this assault which never came before the public eye.

Lord Lillebonne had been much annoyed by Tothill's presence in Strathtartan, and the more annoyed because it was impossible to send the fellow away. The village and the inn were open to Tothill as to anyone else. Not only was Tothill in the village, but he began a system of persecution, partly for the mere pleasure of harassing a nobleman, and partly in hopes of being offered a large bribe to take his departure. He dogged Lillebonne's footsteps. He hung about the outer gate of the Castle, and followed the earl on his walks. He came near his victim and uttered sudden remarks of 'the impostor is hurled to the ground ;' or 'the coronet is snatched from the brows of him who has no right to wear it ;' or 'the real Simon Pure will soon oust

the intruder from the ancestral nest.' These and similar insults were poured into Lillebonne's ears whenever he went out on foot; and being very fond of walking he was unwilling to restrict himself to riding and driving.

Now, Mrs. Maclaren saw how constantly Tothill hung about the Castle; she could hardly emerge from her garden without coming across him. And her vanity caused her to look on her own charms as the reason for his daily proximity. He had always a compliment for her; and she believed him to be madly in love with her; she imagined a whole romance of how she was persecuted by a devoted though respectful adorer, and how her husband would be mad with jealousy if he

discovered her strange though innocent secret. She spent nearly her whole time and thoughts on the means by which she should silently repel Tothill's attentions, and at the same time prevent any collision between him and Mr. Maclaren. With these views—or with others—she was often out near the Castle gates ; and there she was on the morning of the extraordinary assault.

Breakfast was over in the dim chapel-like dining-room. The ladies had gone off to work, to play the piano, to finish sketches, or to talk over their toilettes. Lady Clara had been looking very well, and this morning, in a light summer dress, she was remarkably girlish and handsome. Flora was quiet and retiring as usual.

When the ladies had left the room, the gentlemen began to plan out the day.

‘I am going this morning,’ said the host, ‘to the Craig Farm to see about those repairs which Duff is always clamouring for. Maclaren says he thinks I must do them.’

‘See what it is to be a landlord!’ said Mr. Fitter.

‘Yes. But you can amuse yourselves as you like. You will find the rods in the study as usual; and if you like to make up a shooting-party you can do so without consulting me. The waggonette and the dog-cart are at your disposal. Or you can have the saddle-horses.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sir Charles Denham, a pleasant-mannered man of about forty;

‘perhaps the ladies will ride ; or else Lady Clara will let me give her a billiard-lesson. I don’t think I shall go out this morning.’

‘Nor I either,’ said Mr. Fitter ; ‘I want to tie some flies before lunch.’

‘May I go for a ride, Lord Lillebonne?’ cried Oscar Munro, a tall, fair lad, fresh from Oxford ; ‘my sister wants to go to the Runar Falls, and perhaps we might ride there.’

‘By all means,’ replied the earl ; ‘I daresay Flora would go with you.’

Young Munro ran off to arrange for the ride. Mr. Fitter sauntered away, as if accidentally, in the direction of the drawing-room. He saw no one as he entered, so he walked across to the long rows of

windows all looking south-west, and he admired once more the beautiful view from them. While he stood at one window he heard steps, and saw that Sir Charles Denham had also come into the room and was also admiring the view. Neither spoke ; but each wished the other away. Denham whistled softly ; Fitter examined his nails.

Then the door opened, and in came Lady Clara, with a breezy rustle of her light gown. She did not—or did not appear to—see the gentlemen at the windows, but went to the piano, opened it, and sat down. At the first sound of her voice, Mr. Fitter quietly went across the room to the piano ; and as he did so Sir Charles turned his back on the landscape and looked at

the lady. She sang on as if unconscious that they were there.

At the end of her song, which she had sung with much vigour and expression, the gentlemen both said,

‘Bravo!’

Clara started.

‘Oh, dear! have I had an audience?’

‘An appreciative one, as far as I am concerned,’ said Fitter.

‘An enthusiastic one, as far as I am concerned,’ said Denham.

‘Won’t you sing again?’ said the American.

Clara turned over some music.

‘Are you, neither of you, going out this fine morning?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Fitter, curtly.

‘Not as long as you keep on singing,’ said Sir Charles.

‘I can stop at any moment.’

They both entreated her to sing again ; and for nearly an hour they leaned on the piano and looked soft things at the young lady, and daggers at each other. Mr. Fitter had been much perturbed ever since Sir Charles’s arrival ; and Sir Charles thought it capital fun to alarm the rich American. Clara did not feel sure of the latter, and was glad to have a second string to her bow.

‘What an odd arrangement you have there,’ said Denham, as he nodded at the shawls draped behind the piano.

‘Ah!’ said Fitter, with the air of one who has superior knowledge, ‘perhaps

you don't know what that conceals?'

'No, what is it?'

'Oh, ask Lady Clara;' and the American retired.

'Tell me, Lady Clara, what is this mystery?'

Clara put the music together, and closed the piano.

'It is a mystery which does not concern us. When my grandfather bought Strathtartan, he found that there was a clause in the title-deeds binding him never to open the door behind these shawls. Whatever the mystery is—and I believe it is an imaginary one—it has nothing to do with us.'

'And don't you long to open the door?' asked Denham.

‘ I never think about it.’

‘ Well,’ said the baronet, ‘ all the world knows that there is some mystery in the de Vere family, and I am glad to have seen even the outside of it.’

Clara smiled, knowing what the real mystery was. Fitter looked grave, for reasons of his own.

‘ I think I must go now and write letters,’ said Lady Clara.

At this hint, Mr. Fitter went to the door; Denham slowly followed. As the two men reached it, Clara said, suddenly,

‘ Oh, Sir Charles, please come here.’

Denham strode back to her; Fitter went swiftly on to Lord Lillebonne’s study.

Clara only wanted Sir Charles to rearrange the shawls which had been disturbed. Nay, she had another object. She was softly humming to herself,

‘It is well to be merry and wise,
It is well to be clever and bold,
And it’s well to be on with the new love
Before you are off with the old!’

And she thought that to kindle the fire of jealousy in the heart of the American would be the best way to warm him up to a proposal, to enable him to get up steam for a point-blank offer. Furthermore, she was willing to encourage Denham’s attentions up to a certain point, as he might be useful in case Fitter failed. Sir Charles was a poor man, without even a country place, and he had a brother a solicitor, and a cousin a doctor. But a

baronet is not altogether to be despised in these days, though a rich American is more useful and also more *chic*.

So while Clara, looking beautiful, though a trifle wicked, kept up a flirting conversation with Sir Charles, Mr. Fitter was interviewing Lord Lillebonne in the study.

‘If you could spare me a few minutes,’ said Fitter, ‘I should be glad, for I want to speak to you on a matter which concerns my own happiness, and perhaps that of another.’

Stupid and slow of intellect as was the earl, he could hardly fail to understand Fitter’s preamble.

‘Come in, come in,’ he said, nervously, growing scarlet; ‘sit down there, not

on those lines, please, nor on those canisters of shot.'

'I'd rather stand, thank you,' said Mr. Fitter, drawing himself up in front of the fire-place. He was a tall, thin, good-looking man, and made the earl, who had seated himself, look small and insignificant.

There was a short silence, until Lillebonne, having fidgetted with a paper-cutter, said anxiously,

'You have something to say?'

'Yes, that is so. Lord Lillebonne, you are a very happy man; you have a beautiful and charming daughter.'

'Both my daughters——' stammered Lillebonne.

'They are both beautiful and charming,

but it is of Lady Clara that I wish to speak.'

'Oh, of Clara——'

'You may perhaps think,' said Mr. Fitter, growing more rapid and almost eloquent as he went on, 'that I should have spoken first to the lady herself, and have ascertained the state of her feelings before applying to you. But I am anxious to be fortified by your good opinion and approval, and then I shall present myself to Lady Clara with a little more confidence.'

'Quite so,' said the earl, tapping with the paper-cutter, and growing calmer.

'I am aware that English social views and customs differ somewhat from our own, and if I am making any great blun-

der in conduct, you must excuse me and forgive me. I am aware that an English peer holds a position of which we Americans have no right idea, and that I, the grandson of a working man who made a little money, and the son of a working man who made a great deal of money, am in no way on an equality with the Earl of Lillebonne. I daresay my ancestry goes back as far as yours, but then it is not on record, and that makes all the difference. But we don't think much of parentage.'

'Nor do we of late years,' said Lord Lillebonne, affably.

'My position in New York,' said Mr. Fitter, 'is much like yours in London, my position in Washington is much like yours

in Scotland. That is to say, I am entitled by my wealth, as you by your rank, to enter any society and aspire to any office. Not that I am one of the very richest men, just as you are not of the very highest rank.'

Here the earl grew red again and fidgetty.

'Mr. Fitter,' he said, with his impressive House of Lords manner upon him, 'it is true that I am not a duke; but there is no dukedom in the United Kingdom, which can compare with the de Vere earldom. Our pedigree is far more ancient than that of the Howards, the Montagues, the——'

'Of course, of course,' interrupted Mr. Fitter, 'of that I am well aware, I began

by saying so. And it is that marvellous pedigree, that line of ancestors lost in the mist of the Middle Ages, which makes me feel that I am taking a liberty in raising my eyes to your daughter.'

'Not at all,' said Lord Lillebonne, conciliated; 'do you mean that you like my Clara?'

'I admire Lady Clara, I respect, I esteem her; I hold her as something more than human, as a goddess, an angel, a princess.'

'Oh, she's not all that; a pretty girl, and a clever girl enough. Now, Fitter, what do you really wish?'

'I want you to tell me if you think I may approach Lady Clara.'

'You have my best wishes; I can say

no more. You young people must settle things between you. But if you feel anxious because you have not a long genealogical tree—well, my dear sir, you may throw that anxiety to the winds. If you settle matters with Clara, you shall have my approval; and I am sure Lady Lillebonne will endorse my words.'

'My income,' said Mr. Fitter, 'is about a hundred thousand a-year;' Lillebonne started in astonishment; 'dollars, not pounds, say twenty thousand per annum; and I daresay Lady Clara will manage to live on that, with some economy.'

'Oh, yes,' said Lillebonne, thinking of his own half-empty coffers.

'I also have mines, marble quarries, engineering works, and a few other in-

vestments which will bring in money one of these days. And if Lady Clara condescends to become my wife she will not marry a pauper, though her beauty and rank would entitle her to look much higher. I have thought it well to be thus frank with you, my lord, before I speak to the lady herself.'

Lillebonne shook hands with Mr. Fitter.

'Go and prosper,' said he; 'do you know where Clara is?'

'I left her in the drawing-room with Sir Charles Denham.'

'Denham, oh! We must get rid of Denham; he is poor as a church-mouse. Let us go and find the ladies.'

Fitter smiled to think how he had got

ahead of Sir Charles, but frowned to think how the baronet might have improved this half-hour with Clara. The earl led the way to the drawing-room; no Clara was there. He then rang for a servant, and Miller came and said that he did not know where her ladyship was. Further enquiries brought a surmise from Sinfield the butler that Lady Clara might have gone to see old Mrs. Glen at the Inver-tartan Lodge, who was very ill, but he did not know for certain.

‘Well, well,’ said Lillebonne, ‘we shall find her presently. Fitter, my dear boy, will you come with me up to Duff’s farm, or will you hang about here until the ladies appear?’

‘I’ll go with you to the farm,’ said Fit-

ter; 'I should like to learn how to deal with English tenants, in case I ever buy property in England.'

'This is not England,' said the earl, laughing, 'and Duff is not an English tenant. There is a good deal of difference between a Highland farmer and an English one, say in Kent or Devonshire.'

'Is there?' said Fitter, following his host to the hall.

There stood Sir Charles Denham, not particularly radiant, certainly not a typical accepted lover.

'What are you going to do?' asked the baronet of the others.

'We are going to stretch our legs up Ninone, as far as Duff's farm. He wants all sorts of repairs, so Maclaren says,

and I am going to inspect his premises.'

'I'll come with you,' said Denham.

'By all means.'

When they got outside the hall-door, they saw the young groom Jamie in affectionate conversation with his mother, the lodge-keeper; Jamie made off in the direction of the stables, and the mother hastened to open the gates for his lordship and friends to pass through. Lillebonne smiled good-naturedly at this little episode.

But when he had passed through the gates, he saw on the other side of them that which did not raise a smile on his solemn countenance; he saw Tothill and Mrs. Maclaren in friendly confabulation. Both looked vexed when the earl appeared. Mrs. Maclaren hastily said, 'Good morn-

ing' to Tothill and walked on towards the bridge; but the author faced round and stared aggressively at Lord Lillebonne. There was something insufferably impertinent in Tothill's manner. The satisfaction imparted by Jabez W. Fitter's proposal was swept away by this wretched Tothill's insolent presence.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ASSAULT.

Mais, hélas, je ratiocine
 Sur mes fautes et mes douleurs,
 Espèce de mauvais Racine
 Analysant jusqu' à mes pleurs.

VERLAINE.

OUTSIDE the gates the road, though private property, was open to the public. Tothill had as much right there as Denham, Fitter, or Mrs. Maclaren. He felt himself on safe ground, and held up his head accord-

ingly with the most offensive air he could assume, and very offensive it was.

Augustus Tothill was now a much worse man than he was some six months ago, when we saw him at the private view of the Advance Gallery. *Facilis descensus Averni*. Since he had adopted the downward course of obtaining unearned money, he had run rapidly on the steep slope towards perdition. It had been so easy to frighten and blackmail a weak man like Lord Lillebonne, it had become so pleasant a thing to squeeze funds out of him, that honest work had begun to appear dull, the *Monday Moon* shone with diminished light, even the three-volume novel, with its possible fame and profit, was now only thought of in a careless, idle moment.

Tothill was quite clever enough to perceive the deterioration in his own character; he watched himself growing baser every day; he almost wept tears over his own rascaldom; he reasoned with himself as he would have reasoned with another man thus going to the bad; but he went on still in his evil courses. A cheque or a note from Lillebonne came in so handy that Tothill, though in private calling himself a swindler, could not resist the temptation to continue swindling.

And yet he was not altogether a swindler, and with this fact he quieted his conscience. It was true that Lord Lillebonne's position was not unquestionable; it was true that a 'real Simon Pure' might, at any moment, come forward and

take possession of all the worldly advantages which at this moment Lillebonne held. If Tothill could find the real earl, and either bring him forward, or keep him in reserve, then he, Tothill, would no longer be a swindler but a noble-minded iconoclast, an exposé of frauds, a patriotic denouncer of an impostor.

Thus did he reason, and thus did he temporise, and thus did he resolve; and he went out in the soft September sunshine, and waylaid the earl, and paid compliments to silly Mrs. Maclaren.

‘No,’ he replied, in answer to some coquettish question of hers, ‘I cannot tear myself away from Strathtartan; it has more attractions for me than I dare confess.’

‘The country is very beautiful,’ said Mrs. Maclaren ; ‘these mountains and streams—oh, is that my husband there among the firs ? I really must run home.’

‘I saw Mr. Maclaren starting up Ninnone,’ said Tothill ; ‘he will not be back till dinner-time, depend upon it. Yes, the country is not bad, but it is the people who inhabit it who are so charming.’

‘The old Sandys and Bobbys and Archies ?’

Tothill laughed. The lady gave a little shriek.

‘Oh, here comes Mr. Maclaren !’

For the gates of the Castle had opened and Lord Lillebonne, Sir Charles Denham,

and Mr. Fitter had come through them. They were a silent party : Mr. Fitter had many things to think of ; Denham was wondering whether Lady Clara would add to his advantages if he took her for his wife ; and the earl was, as usual, heavily weighted with the cares and worries of life.

The three gentlemen walked side by side along the road near the hedge which bordered it. Tothill kept just in front of them, going at a slower pace than theirs. They crossed to the other side of the road ; he crossed too, just in front of them. They saw that he was doing this to annoy them, but they had no wish to speak to the ill-dressed, ill-conducted vagabond, though they chafed under the insult.

Mr. Fitter, the youngest of the three, could hardly keep his hands from seizing Tothill by the collar; and Sir Charles, a heavy man, longed to throw himself on the scoundrel and fell him to the ground. The insult was, of course, intended for Lord Lillebonne; his friends were furious to avenge it.

‘Never mind,’ said the earl, gently; ‘we shall get on presently; there is plenty of time.’

‘That is not the point,’ cried Mr. Fitter, in a loud voice; ‘it is the — insolence of the reptile which I object to. In America we should put a stop to it with a revolver.’

‘No violence, pray,’ said the earl, growing every moment paler and more nerv-

ous ; his fingers twitching with painful excitement.

Denham walked on faster, and placed himself exactly behind Tothill, so close to him that the toes of the baronet's boots touched at every step the worn-down heels of those which encased Tothill's splay feet. Nothing came of this device ; the author kept his temper and his position. He managed to intercept the passage of the three other men, though they could have easily gone forward with a rush. Lillebonne preferred to keep his despicable enemy in front of him, and would not make a rush.

‘This will never do !’ said Denham.

Tothill glanced round with an impudent smile.

‘Let us charge him,’ said Fitter.

‘*How much?*’ said Tothill, who then burst into uproarious laughter at his own witticism.

‘Will you kindly allow us to pass?’ Lord Lillebonne stammered, at length venturing to speak.

‘No!’ roared Tothill, warming up with malignant pleasure, ‘I never give place to impostors.’

Then occurred the extraordinary assault.

Tothill faced round upon Lillebonne; he was unarmed.

‘Impostor!’ cried Fitter.

‘Yes; he is no more Earl of Lillebonne than I am.’

This expression, as he uttered it, sug-

gested to Tothill a further advance in the game which he was playing.

‘ Prove it ! prove it ! ’ said Lillebonne, his mouth filling with froth, his eye glaring, and his whole body stiffening with the passion of anger to which he was so little liable.

‘ Nothing easier, ’ said Tothill, still cool.

‘ Prove it ! produce the real man. ’

A master-stroke of courage and villainy flashed through Tothill’s brain. He said,

‘ I am the man ! ’

Up in the air went the earl’s heavy stick, and fell with a thud upon Tothill’s left shoulder ; he winced, and shrank away lest another blow should fall. Fitter and

Denham each seized an arm of the assailant.

‘Control yourself, my lord, this won’t do, you are putting yourself in the wrong.’

Shrieks of ‘Police!’ and hysterical cries came from a female voice, and Mrs. Maclaren was seen running towards the group of men.

‘You have indeed put yourself in the wrong,’ said Tothill, magnificent in his injured calmness; ‘the supposititious earl attacking the real earl, what a subject for a cartoon or an article!’

‘Oh, *dear* Mr. Tothill, are you hurt?’ said Mrs. Maclaren.

‘Quiet yourself, Lillebonne,’ said Denham.

‘Get away, you lying scoundrel!’ exclaimed Fitter.

‘What is the matter? What is it all about? Are they fighting? Whose fault is it?’ cried some tourists who ran to the spot.

‘I! I! he! he!’ gasped Lillebonne.

Tothill folded his arms and stood majestic.

‘I have been assaulted,’ he said; ‘even were I the lying scoundrel which Mr. Fitter calls me—and which words are actionable—I should still have my remedy in a police-court; but as the real Earl of Lillebonne I have a far better game in my hands. I have but to put the law in motion, and that man will quake in his shoes.’

Fitter went close to Tothill.

‘See here, if you’ll leave this place, at once, without further row, and give me a written promise never to molest the earl again, I’ll hand you a thousand dollars.’

‘Dollars!’ said Tothill, scornfully.

‘Two thousand.’

Tothill laughed drily and more scornfully.

Denham was entreating Lillebonne to return home.

‘Take my arm, and let us get back to the Castle. This brute has upset you. You’ll be all right presently. He only wants money.’

‘But if it is true——’ groaned the earl, broken down as much by his own out-

burst of fury, as by the fearful possibility of Tothill's story being correct.

‘It can’t be true. He’s a lunatic. And a dangerous one. Come back to the Castle; he can’t pursue you there.’

‘I know it is a lie,’ said Lillebonne, ‘and yet it might be true.’

‘I’ll stake my life on it that it is not true.’

By degrees Sir Charles got Lillebonne nearer to the Castle gates.

Fitter was still with Tothill.

‘Now, look here, you won’t make any more by this little dodge than what I have offered you. Two thousand dollars are not to be despised.’

‘I don’t despise them; but I should prefer to have my rights, the earldom, and

Mont Veraye and Strathtartan.' While he spoke he was roughly calculating how much he would take to forego his rights, and how much it was likely the earl would offer.

'A pretty earl you would make!' said Fitter, contemptuously; 'you are not much like the English aristocracy.'

'That shows how little you know of the English aristocracy,' was Tothill's not unskilful retort.

Mrs. Maclaren was sobbing bitterly against the hedge. The tourists had gone on.

'You shut up!' roared Tothill, at his female friend, who, he felt, was bringing ridicule upon him; 'what the devil are *you* howling for? You have not been

assaulted. Now, Mr. Fitter, Americans are *cute*. Listen to me. I have first to summons Lord Lillebonne—or rather the man calling himself by that name—for this brutal assault; afterwards I claim my title and property. I now return to my hotel, and proceed to consult an eminent lawyer in Edinburgh. Repeat what I say to your friend at the Castle.’

Mrs. Maclaren had disappeared; Lillebonne and Denham were within the Castle gates; Tothill walked away, with a lump on his shoulder which was rather painful, and a pleasant glow of satisfaction at the turn affairs had taken. Fitter slowly moved towards the Castle, not at all sure, after this commotion, whether he should still like Lord Lillebonne for a father-in-

law. If there was really any doubt as to his not being the genuine peer, what would be the good of marrying Lady Clara—who might be no ‘Lady’ Clara after all?

Some rumour of what had happened outside had penetrated the Castle walls. Lady Lillebonne was anxious, the servants inquisitive. Clara and Flora, and the boy and girl Monro, were still absent; the whole affair with Tothill had not occupied a quarter of an hour.

In the morning-room the earl and countess, with Denham and Fitter, sat down to discuss the matter. Lord Lillebonne was now in terror as to the results of his assault on Tothill. He turned sick when he thought that he might figure in

a police-court; the indignities which he might have to endure, seemed to him quite awful in their vague possibilities.

‘As to the creature’s pretensions,’ said he, with a shudder, ‘well, I think his appearance disposes of them. The House of Lords *could* not put me aside for so vulgar and ill-dressed a scoundrel.’

‘He is a cad,’ said Denham.

‘But for all that,’ said Fitter, ‘don’t despise him too much. Many a battle has been lost through underrating the adversary.’

‘Let him prove his words,’ said Lady Lillebonne; but she too was anxious and troubled.

When the young people came home, they were informed of what had occurred.

Next day the newspapers had it all in large type, and Flora wrote her letter to Felix Vereker. Tothill disappeared from the village, having told his landlord that he must consult his lawyer in Edinburgh.

With the author's absence, all disturbing elements had quitted Strathtartan; the Castle resumed its dignified calm. Visitors came and went. Mr. Jabez W. Fitter took a walk in the garden with Lady Clara Vere de Vere, and returned to the house her accepted lover. Lady Lillebonne once more urged on Flora the merits of Mr. Merivale, and explained how delightful it would be to her feelings, as a mother, to part with both her daughters at once; and how economical it

would be to have one wedding for two marriages.

Flora showed some of the de Vere spirit.

‘ I am engaged to another man, and Mr. Merivale is out of the question. If you want a second couple on Clara’s wedding-day, you must persuade either Senlac or Eustace to provide you with a daughter-in-law. No, dear mother, the more I see of the “marrying men” who pervade society, the more I feel how immeasurably superior Felix Vereker is to any of them.’

Lady Lillebonne ceased to urge Mr. Merivale’s claims.

Only three quiet days had passed when a bomb-shell fell into the earl’s study in the

shape of a letter from a W.S. of Edinburgh, enquiring whether Lord Lillebonne would prefer to appear in a police-court or to compromise matters with Augustus Tothill, Esq., and further enquiring whether his lordship would quietly resign his title and estates on favourable terms, or push Mr. Tothill (more properly the Earl of Lillebonne) to the extremity of making his claim good before the House of Lords.

Once again was the unhappy nobleman in the depths of despair. He knew that he must compromise in the matter of the assault by payment of some considerable sum of money; and he feared that he should have to incur enormous expense in defending himself in the other matter.

He uttered his groans in his wife's presence.

‘Do not be down-hearted,’ she said, cheerfully; ‘I am quite certain this man is not a de Vere at all. Everything will come right.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. It may be all wrong. And I have no one to consult.’

‘You can consult me.’

‘Yes, my dear Clara, but, after all, you are not a lawyer.’

‘I am not,’ she conceded; ‘why not run up to Edinburgh and see your own lawyer? Mr. Macniven will know exactly what to do.’

‘Yes,’ said Lillebonne; ‘yes, but I don’t consider Macniven my own lawyer; he only acts for me in Scotland. Taylor

of Bush Lane is our family solicitor, but I don't think he is sharp enough to fight these Scotch lawyers. I'll go to Macniven. Oh, my father made a great mistake when he bought this place. We de Veres have no business to be in Scotland. Mistakes! why, we make nothing but mistakes! Everything that I do is wrong. I know I am weak when I am not roused. I temporise before the danger, and I provoke it when I come face to face with it, and I weep over it when I have fallen into it.'

'Oh, my love!' said his wife, putting her arm round his neck and kissing his forehead, damp with agitation; 'my dearest love, you judge yourself too harshly. You are the best of men, the best of hus-

bands and fathers, so unselfish, so amiable, so high-minded.'

But her truthful flattery did not quite soothe the ruffled heart.

'I ought never to have given way to that Tothill; the first time he wrote to me, I ought to have put his letter in the fire without sending any answer to it.'

'Letters?' asked her ladyship; 'has he been writing to you?'

'I forgot you did not know; Clara knows.'

He proceeded to tell his wife about the various epistles from 'Veritas,' and the various sums sent in response to them. She tried not to blame him, but could not succeed. He uttered more and more emphatic self-reproaches, and the morning-room be-

came a place of wailing. Lillebonne refused to be comforted.

At last his wife grew weary of the scene, and used energetic means of bringing him to reason.

‘Come, come, enough of this. You carry it too far. Look on the bright side. You know very well that this Tothill cannot be the heir.’

‘But he may be able to bring forward the heir.’

‘He may also be able to bring forward the man in the moon, but he won’t perform either feat. You will not be disturbed, take my word for it. And you may congratulate yourself on the capital stroke of business which you have just done in another direction.’

‘Which is that?’ said the dejected nobleman.

‘Securing Fitter for Clara.’

‘There again! Why, the fellow is the son of a working-man—he says so himself—and as Yankee as he can be.’

‘Not Yankee,’ said the lady, ‘only American. And nothing can be better taste in these days than to marry into American wealth. You ought to be as happy as—as I am. Get Mr. Macniven to settle with that Tothill once for all; and then, in October, we must return to London to see about Clara’s *trousseau*. By that time Flora’s infatuation for that young artist will have worn itself out, and everything will be once again bright around you.’

Lord Lillebonne smiled a sickly smile, but did not seem as happy as—as his wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LEGAL OPINION.

But the jingling of the guinea heals the hurt that Honour
feels.

TENNYSON.

THE Clarendon Hotel in Princes Street looks upon the grim Castle of Edinburgh. There is no finer street in Europe than Princes Street. He whom business compels to spend a week in the modern Athens may well congratulate himself on the

locality chosen by Fate. Lord Lillebonne, looking out upon that magnificent prospect opposite his window, did not fail to admire it. He dined alone, and went out in the autumn twilight and walked up and down in the Princes Street Gardens. From St. John's Church to the Waverley Station, and from the Waverley Station end to St. John's Church, he paced two or three times, wondering whether there could possibly be any truth in Tothill's claim, and also wondering how it would be regarded by the legal mind.

In the old town above him the lights twinkled in many windows ; along Princes Street rumbled tram-cars, omnibuses, and cabs ; below, in the hollow, snorted and puffed asthmatic engines. At length

Lillebonne felt weary of his own thoughts ; he went into the hotel, and found there a note from Mr. Macniven, appointing eleven o'clock next morning for an interview.

The earl was punctual ; but Macniven was engaged. A quarter of an hour was spent in an outer room, and then Lillebonne was admitted to the lawyer's *sanctum*.

'I am very sorry, my lord,' said Macniven, 'to have kept you waiting, but a lady client was here, and I could hardly hurry her away.'

'It is difficult to hurry ladies,' said the earl.

'They always favour one with so many superfluous details. They never stick to the point. Now, this good woman has

been travelling in Norway, and sent home two boxes by long sea. The steamer, on board which they were, had not been out a day when it collided with another, and sank.'

'Very unfortunate!' said Lillebonne; 'I wish this Tothill had been in it. Do you think that he can possibly make any claim?'

'Quite possibly,' returned the lawyer; 'well, she claims the value of the contents of her two boxes, but as they were not insured I am afraid she will recover nothing. On the contrary, she has had to pay a lot of money.'

'Oh, as for paying money, I am quite weary of paying money.'

Mr. Macniven was a stout, loose-hung,

florid man who sat back in a deep arm-chair.

‘They have raised the vessel,’ he continued, ‘and she has been called on to pay her share of the cost of raising; that she looks on as a grievance. Then she gets a letter from the Salvage Society to say that her boxes are recovered, and that if she chooses she can buy them back; if not, they will be sold by public auction.’

‘Buy back her own property?’ said Lillebonne, interested in spite of himself.

‘Yes, they are no longer hers; they belong to the Salvage corps.’

‘That seems curious and unjust.’

‘So she thinks, but it is the law. If she had only insured her boxes, she could recover for them. It is astonishing how

people will neglect to insure, even their houses and their lives.'

'I wish I could insure my title,' said the earl, with a dark smile.

'Oh, it is in no real danger. Why, I remember your father; no one ever hinted of any claimant in his days. I spent a week once at Strathtartan. He had some very good port. We drank port in those days, and were all the better for it.'

'Perhaps,' put in Lillebonne, 'I had better leave the question of getting rid of Tothill as a claimant to my lawyer in London, and only take your opinion on the subject of the assault.'

'I understand, from what you have written, that you admit the assault. Admissions are dangerous things. I am

always sorry when my clients admit anything without consulting me. Now, I'll tell you a curious story of a man who admitted that he had committed a felony of which he was perfectly innocent.'

'I am not innocent in this case,' said Lillebonne, talking down in self-defence the garrulous old solicitor; 'I struck Tot-hill a pretty heavy blow on his shoulder, and I hope it still smarts: and the point with me is, shall I offer him money to heal the wound, or shall I let him get a summons against me, and then, in my defence, explain the provocation he had given me?'

'Ah, now, provocation is an awkward thing to tackle. Some magistrates will rule that to call a man a liar is not suffi-

cient provocation, while another will think that if you tread on a fellow's corn he is justified in thrashing you. I know a case in which, on board a penny steamer on the Thames——'

'In my case, do you suppose a magistrate would hold me justified in taking the law into my own hands?'

'If your case came before a man like Sir Andrew Barnacle, for instance, he would probably dismiss the summons. But Mr. Goolidge very likely would inflict the heaviest fine allowed by law. There was a poor, weakly house-painter who pushed his great, muscular wife——'

Lord Lillebonne stood up; he could endure this no longer; he feared that poor old Macniven had 'run all to fat,'

and that his brain, indeed, was softening.

‘Well, good-bye, Macniven ; I won’t waste any more of your time.’

‘Good-day, my lord,’ said the lawyer, suddenly growing business-like and firm ; ‘my unhesitating advice is that you should compromise this matter, whatever it may cost you. Don’t have your name dragged before the public. It has already been in the papers more than enough.’

‘Yes, yes,’ cried the earl, regaining confidence in his legal adviser, ‘that is true. So settle it if you can for five, ten, twenty pounds. Remember I am a poor man for my position. And if I should lose my position——’

‘Don’t trouble yourself about that ; this Tothill, or anybody else, must bring for-

ward some very cogent evidence before the House of Lords would dream of disturbing you.'

Lord Lillebonne went back to his hotel much cheered by Macniven's words. It did strike him that a letter with a penny stamp, or a halfpenny post-card, would have done as well as his journey from Strath-tartan, but there was a certain satisfaction in having an interview with his solicitor, and a certain sense of security in a *viva-voce* consultation. He had lunch at the 'Clarendon,' and returned to Strath-tartan in time for dinner.

In the evening he told his wife that Macniven would settle everything; and to his family and guests he presented such an appearance of assured contentment that

they were quite easy on his account. Mr. Fitter had been very anxious ; for, if Lady Clara was not really an earl's daughter, what would be the use of marrying her ? There were plenty of girls at home as handsome as she, and handsomer. But now everything seemed comfortably settled.

Four days later Lord Lillebonne received a letter from Mr. Macniven, saying that Tothill was willing to accept a hundred pounds in full payment of bodily injuries received at the hands of his lordship, 'and not a penny less.' Over this assessment of damages the earl groaned ; but paid. Over the repairs at Duff's farm he groaned ; but paid. Over the cheque for Clara's *trousseau* he groaned ; but paid. When

Lady Lillebonne announced the necessity of migrating to London in order to buy the *trousseau*, he not only groaned but protested.

‘I thought we were settled here until after Christmas. It is really very expensive moving a whole household to and from London and the Highlands. Could you not order what you want from Edinburgh?’

‘Everything is dearer in Scotland than in England.’

‘Then have the things sent from London.’

‘Think of the charges for carriage, my dear! And how could we have any choice? The *trousseau* must be bought either in London or in Paris.’

‘Oh, not Paris!’ said Lord Lillebonne.

‘You have only two daughters, and only one of them is likely to marry; and you *must* do what is right for that one. The wedding must take place in London.’

‘Oh,’ said the earl; ‘I thought we might have it quietly here.’

‘My dear boy! In a country where English churchmen are considered dissenters! No, indeed.’

‘Then at Mont Veraye.’

‘If you like. But I did not think you would wish for the expense of putting up all our guests for several days, as you must do if you invite them into Worcestershire. In London one only has them for a couple of hours, and they require very little more than tea. At Mont Veraye you would have to provide carriages for

everybody, but in London they would bring their own carriages. And, Lillebonne, you must remember that the local people all took the part of that young man ; and I am afraid something unpleasant would happen if Clara were to be married there.'

'I had forgotten poor Laurence,' said the earl; 'his grave is just beside the path. No, you are right, Mont Veraye would not do. Let it be in London.'

So this point was settled; and orders sent to Eaton Place that the house should be prepared for the return of the family. Lady Lillebonne knew that by having the marriage in town she would escape a great deal of expense ; for it was not likely that friends on the Continent, in Scotland, in

Ireland, in out-of-the-way country places, would accept her invitations to her daughter's wedding. Her calculations proved correct. Very few persons were able to promise to be in Eaton Place in October. In fact, they did not care to be there, for they knew that the 'function' would not be worth going to. Lord and Lady Lillebonne were not leaders of fashion; their small means—that is, small for their rank—prevented them from giving entertainments which cost large sums of money, and their pride prevented them from inviting to their houses those wealthy *parvenus* whom it was an advantage to meet. So the great world—Society with a capital—was not able to attend Lady Clara's wedding.

Mr. Fitter behaved very well ; he was affectionate, but not demonstrative. He gave his bride some handsome jewelry. He did not wish many of his own friends to be invited to Eaton Place. Indeed, he had but few friends in England. Clara was quite satisfied with her lover. She thought that when he took her to his country, she would find her title very impressive ; for the inhabitants of a republic worship ‘ handles ’ with an open adoration which would be very bad taste among the subjects of a monarchy and the associates of an aristocracy.

While Clara was thus the heroine of the hour, poor Flora was left out in the cold. She would, of course, be her sister’s bridesmaid, but that is a position which

brings no great honour, though in this case it would bring emolument, for Mr. Fitter was known to have ordered six diamond butterflies. Flora had no hope that Felix Vereker would be invited to the wedding; he was never mentioned. That engagement seemed more than ever hopeless. Letters passed between Flora and Felix; each knew what the other was doing and thinking. But as to any wedding at the end of that engagement, they really no longer expected it. 'Some ten or twenty years hence,' wrote Felix; and Flora replied, 'Let us be patient.'

Lord Lillebonne had almost forgotten the young artist; but one day he suddenly remembered the likeness of Flora that he had commissioned Vereker to paint.

‘I don’t see why I should not have it,’ he said to himself; ‘perhaps if I get it and pay for it, just as if Vereker were a tradesman, I shall make him feel how impossible it is that he should ever be my son-in-law. And yet, if he gets on in his profession, he will be a good enough match for a girl who cares nothing about rank or money. And he is a gentleman; somehow I like him better than I do Fitter. But her mother will never consent. And so what can I do? Well, Tothill is got rid of—for the present.’

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DYING BRIDE.

Et, Rose, elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un matin.

VICTOR HUGO.

ABOUT three weeks had passed since the melancholy marriage day of Harry Coleman and Edith Crane. Several times Felix Vereker had called to see them, and each time he had come away with a heavy heart. For they were *so* happy!

Harry was devotedly loving and tender to his lovely young bride; Edith was the gentlest and sweetest little wife that could be imagined. The tiny *ménage* in the studio-attics was charming; there were pretty luncheons, delicious teas, toothsome suppers, whenever Vereker went there by invitation. And when he merely called there was always a hearty welcome.

But he could not fail to see each time that he entered the place, that the little mistress of it was more and more fragile, more and more ethereal. Her glittering eyes, her roseleaf cheeks, her transparent hands, seemed at each visit more and more striking. At first she had been very excitable, talking and laughing with extraordinary gaiety; latterly she had

been quieter, even silent, smiling in answer to her husband's or Vereker's pleasantries. She often now was found lying on the sofa; of an evening she usually said that she was tired, and left the studio early. Felix wondered whether Harry was prepared to lose his wife. Not a word was said by either on that subject; but one evening, after Edith had tottered away, Coleman sat gazing into Vereker's eyes with a strange questioning gaze. Felix bore it as long as he could, and then put his hand across his eyes. Harry threw himself on the couch from which Edith had just risen, and lay there sobbing convulsively but without uttering a word. Felix looked on in great distress; he laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, but the

hand was shaken off impatiently, almost angrily. He stood beside the miserable husband, who in his agony of grief would let no sound escape him which might distress his wife.

After a few minutes—after an age of suffering—Coleman lifted his white, haggard face from the cushions, sat up, and said,

‘Are you going to send those pictures to Gumm’s as you talked of doing?’

‘What?’ cried Felix, startled; ‘what pictures?’

‘You talked of sending two or three to Gumm’s first winter exhibition.’

‘Oh, yes,’ replied Vereker, beginning to regain his composure; ‘I am sending the “Buttercups,” that portrait of Mrs.

Moods, the enlargement of my great-great-grandmother, and I may send the picture of Lady Flora if her father will allow me.'

'Has he paid you?'

'No. He has not seen the picture since it was finished. I don't think I will let him have it now. I certainly won't let him buy it.'

'Are there no signs of yielding in that quarter?'

'None,' said Felix.

Harry was silent. Then he went and listened at the bed-room door, and returned saying,

'I believe she is asleep. Vereker, she is no worse. But I dread the winter for her.'

‘She has no cough,’ said Felix.

‘No cough, only general failure. She never now gets up to breakfast. What price do you ask for your great-great-grandmother?’

‘She may be my great-great-aunt for all I know; and I will not sell her at all. Lord Lillebonne scoffed at me for having an ancestress, but I value mine just as much as he values his. I will sell Mrs. Moods for forty pounds. She is a study of a charwoman, but I have no special affection for her.’

Coleman laughed.

‘And you, Harry, what have you done lately?’

‘Nothing,’ was the reply; ‘I can’t work at present.’

He looked at his watch, and Felix took the hint.

‘It is a long way to my place, so I think I’ll be going.’

Harry closed the door quietly upon his retreating friend, who went silently down the stone stairs to the street-door. There, beneath the dim but artistic lantern, stood Mr. Quekett, looking through the open door to the damp street.

‘It has come on a wet night, sir; would you like me to fetch a cab?’

‘Oh, no, I have a thick coat; I shall walk through it.’

‘And pray, Mr. Vereker, what do you think of that poor young thing upstairs? She is not long for this world, if I’m any judge.’

‘I am afraid she is very bad,’ returned Felix; ‘each time that I see her she seems to me more and more feeble. Do you think she has everything that she needs?’

‘She could not have more if she was a duchess. It is chickens and grapes and turtle-soups every day till I wonder how Mr. Coleman can pay for it all.’

So did Felix; and this opened up a fresh anxiety.

About this time Mrs. Quekett came creeping on the scene.

‘Oh, Mr. Vereker, ain’t this sad? I’m that sorry for the poor young things that often I just sit down and cry about them. Don’t I, Quekett?’

‘Yes, indeed, often.’

‘Why, Mr. Coleman has had three doc-

tors here; one of them, he said, was the most famous doctor for consumption that there is in London. But I see by their faces when they come downstairs that they don't give no hope for Mrs. Coleman. So I just do my best, and will do my best as long as there is anything to do. Though it's no easy job, I can tell you, with boiled chickens, and stewed sweetbreads, and bread-sauce, and beef-tea, and messes of some kind every day. But I do my duty, don't I, Quekett? And you won't hear me utter a complaint, or put on a gloomy look, or shed a tear, or give way if it was ever so, nor I won't until it is all over; will I, Quekett?'

'No, indeed, you won't,' said the porter.

‘All this must be expensive,’ said Felix.

‘Ah, I believe you!’ whispered Mrs. Quekett; ‘Mr. Coleman must be a richer man than we think him. But it won’t be for long, it won’t be for long.’

‘No,’ echoed her husband; ‘it won’t be for long.’

‘I’ll send in some jelly,’ said Vereker, ‘and anything else I can think of. Poor old Harry! I wonder if it was wise of him to marry!’

‘She’ll die happy,’ said Mrs. Quekett.

‘Yes, she’ll die happy,’ said Quekett.

And Felix walked home with those words ringing in his ears, ‘She’ll die happy.’ And he knew that Coleman would live happier for having given his chival-

rous and devoted love and care to the poor child who was but a dying bride. Little Edith would have died in her mother's room, where she could have had comparatively few comforts; surrounded, as she now was, by every luxury which affection could procure, her path to the grave was made as easy as it could be made. Indeed, Felix felt sure that Harry would suffer afterwards for the luxuries which he bestowed on his wife. It was impossible that he could afford to buy chickens and grapes and champagne every day; he must be plunging heavily into debt. But how could he help it? Could he see his dying wife in want of luxuries and not get them for her, honestly or dishonestly? Should Harry have married,

and taken this great burden on himself? Was it a noble or a rash act? Was it the height of unselfishness or the height of folly?

Vereker had not answered this question when he reached the door of his own flat. He opened it with his latch-key, and stumbled in. There was a small jet of gas which he always kept burning. He turned it up, and bolted the door. In the letter-box lay a missive of some kind, which he carried into the dining-room. There he lighted the gas, and looked about him at the desolate place. He was thirsty, and took some brandy and soda, for he was not a teetotaller, though he drank very little alcohol. Next, he glanced at the letter.

‘Why, what is this?’ he muttered; tearing open the envelope, he found an epistle from Tothill.

‘MY DEAR VEREKER,

‘I am in London again, having done several good strokes of business while in Scotland. I daresay you heard of the brutal attack made on me by the *soi-disant* Earl of Lillebonne. It is he, not I, who smarts for that assault. Perhaps you have not heard that I am about to oust him from his false position. Don’t you wish you were

‘AUGUSTUS TOTHILL,

‘*Earl of Lillebonne, etc., etc.*’

‘Mad!’ was Vereker’s exclamation;

‘this is the letter of a madman. All the same, a lunatic is a very unpleasant adversary. I am sorry for Lord Lillebonne ; he’ll have some trouble with Tothill. If he had any regard for his daughter’s comfort, he would let me give her a home before these disagreeables come upon him. But I’ll be bound to say he is so taken up with marrying Lady Clara to this rich American that he has no time to think about marrying Flora to a poor American. By Jove, what a tangle everything is in this world !’

It was not for Felix to cut the Gordian tangle of earthly life. There are times which come to every man when the tangle of life seems too distressing for endurance, when a weak man struggles to get away

from it, and a strong man struggles to get through it. Both Vereker and Coleman were strong men; they struggled valiantly to force their way through the maze and the jungle to the open country beyond. Lillebonne was a weak man; he always wanted to turn back or to turn aside, and to get round some other way to the desired goal.

Vereker's tangle was a thick one; he could not imagine any way out of it. Coleman's tangle was very thin at one point; only a few slender twigs to break, and he and Edith would be free from perplexities—she soaring in pure ether, he lying prone in the lonely desert.

‘Poor old Coleman!’ said Felix, with a heavy sigh, as he turned into a confec-

tioner's shop and began to order soups, fish, jellies, pastry, fruit, cream, all sorts of things, to be sent to Willow Green Studios.

The confectioner was far too fashionable to have ever heard of Willow Green, and his carts were far too magnificent to have ever penetrated that unknown region. It was necessary to employ a commissionaire to convey, by train and cab, those luxuries to poor little Edith Coleman. Felix thought ruefully of his diminishing funds, and feared that, unless Mrs. Moods and his great-great-grandmother were quickly sold, he would be obliged to incur debts, as he was sure Coleman was doing. Hitherto Felix had kept clear of serious debt, but there was the flat, which was

expensive, and there was friendship which was expensive, and how would the tangle end?

Mr. Gumm had his well-known premises in the Haymarket. It was a great distinction to have a picture at Gumm's. Everybody went to Gumm's, and if a picture was there, everybody saw it. Some of his artist friends wondered how Felix contrived to send some pictures to Gumm's. There were, no doubt, several things which contributed to his success. In the first place, his appearance and manner were in his favour, and Mr. Gumm knew a gentleman when he saw one. Then the P.A.G. had happened to speak once to Gumm about 'Apple Blossoms,' and Gumm had made up his mind, if op-

portunity offered, to give Vereker a place in those august galleries—galleries much more august than those of Burlington House or the Advance. Further, Mr. Gumm knew that Lord Lillebonne had bought Vereker's 'Apple Blossoms,' and had commissioned him to paint the portrait of Lady Flora Vere de Vere; Gumm also had heard a rumour that Vereker was going to marry that very Lady Flora. Altogether, Vereker seemed to be a man likely to catch the public taste and to become popular. Therefore it was that when he walked into Mr. Gumm's shop and asked for a private interview with the proprietor that interview was granted to Vereker with no more than a decent delay.

October is not May; everybody knows that, and no one knows it better than the London tradesman. Whatever his wares, be they potatoes, petticoats, paper-hangings, pickles, or pictures, they must be different at the beginning of winter from those which he offered at the beginning of summer, and this very much because autumn customers are unlike spring customers. Mr. Gumm knew that the tastes of his October visitors required a calmer, soberer diet than that spread out before the butterflies of May. At this time of year many simple country folks come up to London for the mildest dissipation. They patronise German Reed's Entertainment; they revel at South Kensington; they are wildly excited by the British

Museum; they mount to the cross of St. Paul's; they attend service at the Foundling; in a word they *do* London, in their own fashion, not after the fashion of the May *flâneurs*.

In October Mr. Gumm filled his galleries with works of a quiet and homely character: little *genre* pieces; English landscapes; flower and fruit arrangements. Old gentlemen and elderly ladies from the depths of the country admired and even bought these pictures. The old gentlemen wore hats with brims of the fashion of seven years ago; the elderly ladies decorated themselves with layers of lace, ribbon bows, and odd pieces of jewelry stuck about them in a careless and promiscuous manner; but they had money, and they liked

to spend it when they paid their annual or biennial visits to London.

The astute Mr. Gumm had gauged Felix Vereker's powers—a man who would never set the Thames on fire, but who would light a little flame by which to 'warm both hands.' His muse would not run away with him; she would carry him safely to the winning-post. His pictures would please and would sell. 'Apple Blossoms' had actually been talked about. Two or three of his canvases, which were never very large, might well be set before the autumn visitors to Gumm's galleries. And so it came to pass that Vereker's 'Great-great-grandmother,' and his 'Study of a Charwoman,' together with his 'Portrait of a Man,' (himself) and a *replica* of

‘Buttercups’ were placed in the rooms in the Haymarket, and seen of many people. They did not sell at once, nobody thought they would. ‘Mrs. Moods’ was the favourite, there was said to be humour in her presentment; next came the ‘Portrait of a Man,’ which no one recognised as that of the artist; the ‘Buttercups’ was thought very pretty, but ‘Great-great-grandmother’ was considered stiff.

Felix took his pictures to Gumm’s one day soon after that evening which he had spent at the Colemans’ when Edith seemed to him to be dying. He thought much more of the sorrow in his friend’s home than of any advantage coming to himself through his pictures. Very great advantage was to come to him ere long. But

the approaching grief to Harry Coleman was more in his mind than anything else.

He called once or twice with some little present, but did not go up to his friend's rooms because either the doctor or the clergyman was with them, or Mrs. Coleman had had a very bad night, and her mother had been sent for. One evening he was told that she could not possibly last through the night; next morning he went there early, and Mrs. Quekett's information was that the poor girl had rallied, and the doctor now said that she would linger on for weeks. The following day Felix did not call.

But the day after that he did so. Neither Quekett nor his wife was in the lower part of the building, and Vereker

went upstairs. At the top he found the door of the studio open ; he went in and noticed how dusty and desolate everything was ; no woman's hand now kept it in beautiful order. He looked about for a vase in which to place some *gloire de Dijon* roses which he had brought for Edith, but he found nothing suitable. He went out on the landing wondering where Harry might be.

From the bed-room came sounds as of feet moving, but not of voices. A chill struck upon Vereker's heart ; perhaps at this very moment the gentle girl was dying. The door was opened from within, and the odour from the room proclaimed that the tenant of it was dead. It is most strange, that odour which tells so soon that the

forces which resist death have ceased to energise, and that decay has already begun. We begin to die on the day of our birth. Within the new-born infant's frame is the germ of that disease which will some day beat the man down to the grave ; there is the weak spot in the heart, the lungs, the brain, which growing ever weaker at length gives way, and drops him by the roadside, worn out in the struggle. We are dying all our lives ; with some the process is longer, with some shorter. There is no more pathetic line penned by Pope than his history of himself—'that long disease my life.' Little Edith Crane's disease had been but short, for her life was but short.'

From the open door came out Mrs.

Quekett, very grave and silent. She carried a counterpane and other bed furniture.

‘ Oh, Mr. Vereker, it is all over.’

‘ I thought so. When?’

‘ At 8.30 this morning.’

‘ Who was with her?’

‘ Her husband and her mother.’

‘ Was there much suffering?’

‘ None at the last. There had been very distressing breathlessness, but that ceased for about an hour, and then she was perfectly calm. Suddenly she gave one great sigh, and she was gone.’

Felix looked at his roses, and said nothing.

Presently Mrs. Quekett asked,

‘ Shall I tell Mr. Coleman you are here?’

‘ Yes, please.’

Felix still remained on the landing and still looked stupidly at the roses. He thought they had begun to wither.

Coleman came from the room, a white, haggard object hardly to be recognised. He put out his hand to his friend, but did not speak. Vereker opened his arms and clasped Harry in them as he might have clasped a child; and Harry laid his head on Vereker's shoulder as a woman might have done. But neither of them spoke. Felix relaxed his grasp; that momentary confession of weakness was over. A man cannot embrace another man without being ashamed of his weakness, unless he be a Frenchman. Even at this solemn moment Felix was ashamed of his tenderness and Harry of his emotion.

Coleman beckoned Felix to enter the room. Laid on the mattress and covered with a sheet was the beautiful corpse of Edith. Beside it, on a low chair, rocking herself, sat Mrs. Crane; she did not weep; no one weeps on the day of a death. Next day tears begin to flow. Mrs. Quekett came back and silently turned down the sheet, exposing the placid white face. The golden hair rippled over the pillow; and there was on the features a slight smile, and a strange suggestion that the closed eyes were looking towards something very far off.

For a few moments Felix gazed at this head, more lovely than any piece of sculpture; then he laid the yellow roses upon the ripples of the golden hair, and left the

room. He had no right to stay there. Coleman followed him.

‘Will you come with me, Harry?’ said Vereker; ‘come and stay with me.’

‘Not at present.’

‘Not to-night?’

‘No; I shall remain here.’ He waved his hand round the disordered studio.

‘Will you come to me by-and-by?’

‘Yes, afterwards.’

Felix nodded and went away.

On the stairs, as he went down, he met Quekett, who was bustling up them, raised in importance by the event which had just happened in the Willow Green Studios. ‘The first death we’ve had!’ he said, with lugubrious glee. ‘I’ve been to the undertaker, and I’ve been to the secretary of

the company, and I've had a talk with Howland, and I've made everything right. I'm going to Mr. Coleman's tailor this afternoon; and I've more to get through than I can manage.'

'I dare say,' was Vereker's response, as he went down further.

He walked home very sadly, full of fear for Coleman, whose life would be far more lonely in the future than if he had never had a companion. He must come and live in Vereker's flat. There would never be any lady there, and these two desolate men must live together to a dreary old age, wedded to nothing but Art.

There was a letter from Flora. The whole party from Strathtartan had come to Eaton Place, and Clara's wedding would

be celebrated on the 29th of October.

‘Do come here some day, and ask to see me, just as if you were an ordinary visitor. Some result might follow. At all events, nothing could be more uncomfortable than our present position.’

During the rest of that day Felix thought much about Flora de Vere, and little about Edith Coleman who lay dead with roses among her rippling golden hair.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ONE OF NATURE'S NOBLEMEN.

No sooner does a young man see his sweetheart coming, but he smugs up himself, pulls up his cloak, now fallen about his shoulders, ties his garters, points, sets his bands, cuffs, slicks his hair, twires his beard, etc.

Anatomy of Melancholy. BURTON.

IT is quite possible that London cabmen may have faults; they may be inclined to take more out of a fare and out of a horse than they are strictly entitled to; but they certainly have one good quality—they are

cheerful and contented. Look at a group of cabmen standing near their empty cabs; how merrily they talk and laugh together! What good-fellowship reigns among them! How easily the cares of life sit upon them! And yet they have troubles like other men; they are no more exempt from trials than peers and philosophers. One of them has a sick wife; another a crippled child; a third has received but one shilling of the fifteen which he must earn in the twenty-four hours before he can put a penny into his own pocket. Yet these three men will lean against some bit of wall, say that which encloses Holland Park, or that which runs beside old Marylebone churchyard, and they will discuss oats, race-courses, harness, and other things con-

nected with equine professions, to say nothing of politics, as if they had all the goods of life without working for them.

I used to be on intimate terms with a cabman and his wife and family. He drove a four-wheeler, and I do not think he drank to any great extent. His wife and four children were the most wretchedly sickly creatures that I ever came across. Yet the man would drive me and my luggage to the town's end for sixpence over his legal fare, and grin at me, and utter jests, and give me friendly greeting in snow or rain or ninety degrees of heat.

Cabmen take a human interest in their fares. When Felix Vereker came out from his flat one soft, warm October afternoon, dressed as a lover should be, a hansom

caught sight of him, and marked him for his own. In vain did a four-wheeler cry, 'Cab, sir?' the hansom knew his man. Felix was borne along in the two-wheeler to Eaton Place; the driver felt instinctively that the good-looking, sprucely-clothed young man was going to call on his young woman. The shilling over his fare confirmed this surmise, and the astute Jehu drove away with a knowing wink of his left eye.

Felix did not feel quite so brave as he looked. What reception he might meet with he could not even guess. Of course Flora would be everything that was delightful; but suppose he should run across her father and mother?

'Is Lady Flora de Vere at home?'

‘Yes, sir,’ replied a young footman.

Felix was ushered upstairs to the drawing-room, which in some undefined way had an out-of-season appearance; there were no flowers about, and some of the furniture was covered with faded chintz. Felix was almost disposed to suspect the neighbourhood of a local Mrs. Moods. He waited for ten minutes, in anxious expectation, or expectant anxiety, for what might happen; when lo! the door of the room opened, and in ran Flora.

She looked radiant; the Highland sun had tanned her cheek, and the Highland breeze had given it colour; her eyes were brighter, her hair more golden, her figure more lithe, than ever before. Felix met her a few steps from the door, and held

out both his hands ; she replied by holding out both her hands, which he caught and held, and so kept her at arms' length while he perused her face, much as Hamlet may have perused the fair face of Ophelia. After that, and when his eyes were satisfied, he put his lips to her smooth, white forehead, and then to her soft pink cheeks, and finally to her red lips, which responded very slightly, but quite perceptibly to the pressure of his. And then he let her go, and drew back a pace or two, and looked at her again.

‘ My darling Flora !’

‘ Oh, Felix, it is nice to see you here.’

‘ And how comes it that you are able to see me here ?’

‘ I really don’t know. You see, I have always told my father and mother that I am engaged to you, and that I shall never think of anybody else ; and it seemed to me when I thought about it all down there in Scotland, that we had better be more bold. Of course, I can’t actually leave my parents and marry you against their expressed wishes, but I don’t think it will be any harm to behave as if we believed in our engagement ; I mean, that you should come to see me, and if we meet out of doors, that you should walk with me and talk with me. You know, Felix, the *only* thing they object to is your being poor.’

‘ I thought they also objected to my not bringing forward a long pedigree.’

‘They cannot object to that,’ said Flora; ‘because Mr. Fitter has no long pedigree.’

‘But he has a long purse. I, alas! have no long purse, and as for pedigree, don’t mention it.’

‘The purse is certain to grow longer,’ cried Flora, brightly; ‘your great talents are sure to make their way. I feel so proud of being chosen by a man of real genius. Your pictures are so lovely. They only need be known better, and all the world will run after you. You have it in you to be one of the greatest painters of the day. There is no young artist at the present moment who comes near you as to form and colour.’

Flora sincerely meant all that she said;

she believed her lover to be a great genius; Raphael, perhaps, was greater; but Titian, Perugino, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Landseer, were distinctly below Vereker in native talent, though they had been lucky enough to please the public taste and to arrive at popularity. Felix did not think so highly of his own powers as Flora did; but it was very sweet to hear her admiration of him, to listen to her praise of his greatness and his goodness. For when he told her about Harry Coleman, his marriage and his bereavement, she saw in the story more of Vereker's kindness and devotion to his friend, than she saw of the pain and pathos which made it so touching. This young lady was so much in love with Felix Vereker,

that he was the pivot on which everything turned; he was the standard by which everything was measured; he was the touchstone by which everything was tested; he was the central figure of every group. All this was very, very silly; but all those persons who have ever been in love will understand Flora's condition of mind; consequently all my readers will understand it.

‘And you are getting on?’ said Flora.

‘Oh, yes, famously. My pictures being seen at Gumm's is doing me good. There came to the studio yesterday a queer old thing who had seen ‘Mrs. Moods,’ and thought she would like me to paint her portrait.’

Flora did not know anything about Mrs.

Moods, so there ensued a history of that respectable person and a description of the flat on the Embankment; afterwards a catalogue of the pictures at Gumm's.

'A portrait of your great-great-grandmother! Why, when did you ever see her?'

'I never saw her; but I have a miniature of her. She must have been very lovely. I sometimes think that you have a sort of look of her. She is an undoubted ancestress of mine; so, you see, I have one link of a pedigree, though Lord Lillebonne did scoff at me for hinting that I, like him, have had forefathers. But why do you knit your brows and look so perplexed? It gives you a most charming expression.'

‘Oh, Felix!’ and the girl blushed and laughed; ‘I do believe that your great-great-grandmother is the lady I was jealous of.’

‘My dearest, what can you mean?’

‘There was a canvas which you always kept with its face to the wall; but once or twice, by some accident, I caught a glimpse of the front of it. It seemed to me a beautiful young woman with an old-fashioned dress.’

‘That is the lady. I turned her face to the wall because I did not want your father to see her; he had sneered at the notion of my ancestors. And so you were jealous, you silly little puss.’

‘I’ll never be jealous again. You must forgive me.’

Forgiveness was granted in the usual form, and Felix arranged to meet Flora at Gumm's gallery and to do the honours of his pictures.

Just as this matter was settled, there walked into the drawing-room a person who was not wanted there—namely, the Countess of Lillebonne.

Flora did not move when she saw her mother; Felix rose and bowed.

Lady Lillebonne put up her *pince-nez* which she only required for reading and writing.

‘Oh, Mr. Vereker—I did not know you were engaged, Flora. Madame Spécialité de Confections is here about the dresses, and she wants to try how the new cowboy hat will suit you.’

The lady gave the slightest possible bow to Vereker, and left the room.

‘Not so bad!’ he exclaimed, with a laugh; ‘I am not insulted, and I am not forbidden the house. Flora, we are progressing.’

‘Yes; and now I must go, for Madame de Confections is a tremendous person, and must not be kept waiting. It is about my bridesmaid’s dress,’ she explained.

Felix caught her in his arms for a last pressure and kiss.

‘We will go on quietly, and perhaps our patience will gain the day. One word more: has Tothill been troublesome lately?’

‘I have heard nothing of him.’

Flora made a rush to the door; there she paused, turned, and kissed her hand to Felix; he made a rush towards her; but she flung the door open, darted through it, and was half-way up a flight of stairs before he was out on the landing. He went back for his hat, and then slowly descended to the hall.

Lord Lillebonne was in his study; he had become aware that Vereker was in the house, and was inclined to speak to him about Flora's portrait. The earl hankered after that portrait of his favourite daughter. He wanted to hang it in his study. He loved Flora. Her quiet firmness, her constancy to her lover which yet did not lead her into disobedience to her parents, was beginning to tell upon him; she was

a good girl ; it was a pity that she could not be happy. If only Vereker had either money or position, then Lillebonne would make up his mind to consent gradually to receive him as a son-in-law.

As Felix came down the stairs, the door of the study opened and Lord Lillebonne came out into the hall, as if by some casual movement ; he glanced at the intruder, and said,

‘ Oh—Mr. Vereker—ah !——’

‘ Good-morning, my lord,’ said Vereker, with a mixture of deference and briskness ; ‘ we are having fine weather for the time of year.’

‘ Very, extremely, quite so. I am not often in town in the autumn. Did you call on business, may I ask ?’

‘ Oh, no, I came to see Lady Flora ; but she has been called away to a dress-maker, so I take my departure.’

Lord Lillebonne thought that the young man was very cool and bold ; his own nervous temperament led him to admire boldness in others.

‘ Come into my study, sir,’ he said, with formal courtesy ; ‘ now, allow me to speak to you about my daughter’s portrait. It is finished, I believe.’

‘ Quite finished, at least as finished as my poor powers are able to finish it.’

‘ I think—I have been thinking—perhaps it would be well—to have the picture. Could you kindly send it home ? I will forward a cheque immediately on receipt of the portrait.’

‘My lord,’ said Felix, drawing himself up with a proud air and facing the earl with conscious dignity; when he did so, the two men were not unlike each other; they might almost have been uncle and nephew. ‘My lord, the picture is yours, it was painted for you. You shall have it. But keep your cheque. I could not sell the woman I love, nor take money for the lady whom I hope to make my wife.’

So impressive was Vereker’s plain-spoken haughtiness that Lillebonne only said, meekly,

‘Oh, I beg your pardon.’

‘No,’ said Felix, growing warmer and braver; ‘that picture has been most emphatically a labour of love. I am very glad that Flora’s father will possess it.

But you must take it as a present, not as a purchase.'

At that moment some current of sympathy passed between the men, and Lillebonne understood Vereker with a sudden flash of recognition. The young man was one of 'Nature's noblemen,' the nobility of his character compensated for the lack of worldly rank. No wonder Flora liked him; why not give way gracefully, and say, 'Take her, and be happy!' like the good father in melodramas?

'You are very kind, Vereker, I appreciate your generosity. Yes, my Flora is a good girl. Only the exigencies of my position hinder me from welcoming you as a member of my family. I am free to confess that there is a nobility of mind

and heart which makes a man the equal of peers and princes. We say *noblesse oblige*, and we restrict the expression to nobility of birth, when rather we should extend it to nobility of heart and mind which compel noble deeds as stringently as ever did worldly rank.'

The earl had his House of Lords manner on him, and Felix listened with amused awe to the grandiloquent incoherence.

'I don't know about generosity or nobility,' returned the artist; 'but a fellow would be a cad who would sell the portrait of his wife. Think of Rembrandt selling Saskia's likeness!'

'Oh, Rembrandt, a very great painter;' and Lillebonne became the patron of Art in a trice. 'I am a worshipper at the

shrine of Rembrandt. Well, then, Vereker, if you will let me have Flora's picture, I shall be greatly indebted to you. And if you like to come and see me sometimes, I shall be glad to give you my views on Art. You can understand that the future of my daughters is very dear to me.'

'I 'hope,' said Felix, with stiff politeness, 'that Lady Clara will be happy.'

'Fitter is a good fellow, and very wealthy. Lady Lillebonne is pleased. A mother should be pleased at the marriage of her daughter. I could not consent to a marriage which Lady Lillebonne did not approve of. A woman seldom takes so broad a view of any matter as a man.'

‘My lord,’ murmured Vereker, moved and cheered by the earl’s tone, ‘I live in hopes.’

There was something like a tear trembling beneath Vereker’s left eyelid; Lillebonne saw it and looked away. Felix backed towards the door.

‘By-the-by, I see in the papers,’ said the earl, with another manner, ‘that you have some pictures on view at Gumm’s. I’ll have a look at them some morning.’

‘Lady Flora has promised to meet me there one day.’

‘I’ll bring her myself. I wish to teach her to distinguish a good picture from a bad one. To-morrow, Wednesday, Thursday—yes, I’ll take her to Gumm’s on Thursday morning. To tell you the

truth, I'm glad to get out of this house sometimes, for it is infested by dress-makers and milliners and people of that kind, and my lady and Clara seem to talk of nothing but fashions. And Fitter is a very good fellow, but his notions of Art are crude, crude in the extreme.'

As Lillebonne said these last words, with a disdainful curl of his lips, he opened the hall-door. He had not the full *posse* of men-servants in town at this time of year, and the young footman had just been sent off with a note to Herr Strauss von Vergissmeinnicht, who was establishing a great reputation for artificial flowers. As the earl stood on the doorstep speaking some last words to Vereker, who was utterly astounded at

the sudden turn which affairs had taken, there approached a shabby figure, grimacing and pointing at the unconscious nobleman. Vereker was shocked to see that it was Tothill.

‘ Good-morning,’ said Felix, shortly, wishing that Lillebonne would go indoors before he had seen the degraded author.

‘ Well, good-bye;’ and the earl held out his hand.

‘ No, I’ll not shake hands with you!’ cried Tothill’s rough voice.

Whereupon Lillebonne looked round and saw the creature whom he loathed as we loathe some vile reptile. Instantly every bit of colour faded from his face; he tottered backwards into his house, and closed the door. Vereker confronted Tot-

hill on the pavement. A baker's young man and a chemist's boy looked on with much interest.

‘Now, Tothill, what does this mean?’

‘It means vengeance!’ hissed Tothill through his closed teeth; ‘that man has heaped insults upon me, and I will pay him out. He has struck me as he might strike a dog, and I will strike him in return. I’ll have my revenge. It will be a revenge such as will make all England ring. *A bas les aristocrats!*’

Tothill seemed quite beside himself; he was flinging his arms about.

‘Look here,’ said Felix, ‘don’t you make a fool of yourself. Let Lord Lillebonne alone. I understood that he had paid for the assault.’

‘For the assault, yes; but now I want the peerage. Is a poor but honest man to be kept out of his rights by a nincompoop like that? Do you know that I am the Earl of Lillebonne?’

‘I did not know it,’ said Vereker. ‘I say, Tothill, I don’t think you should take spirits so early in the day. It is a bad habit, and will have bad consequences.’

‘You are not sober, Vereker, but I forgive you, because I’m a little bit gone the same way myself. Old Lillebonne, too, was quite screwed. But I’ll have my revenge on him. I shall shoot him!’

Vereker was alarmed; Tothill began to feel inside his coat as if he might have a revolver somewhere concealed.

‘Do you mind walking a little way with

me? I want to tell you about poor Coleman.'

Tothill, who was not drunk, though he had been drinking, linked his arm through Vereker's, and certainly the latter could have given no greater proof of his regard for Flora de Vere than by enduring this familiarity. He felt more than ever repelled by his companion; something of fear and horror mingled with contempt and dislike. But because Tothill might, and would if permitted, render himself obnoxious and dangerous to Flora's father, Vereker allowed the dirty hand and the greasy coat-sleeve to rest on his immaculate serge suit. Immediately Tothill seemed to forget all about Lord Lillebonne and the assault and the claim to the peerage,

and to be quite occupied with the history of Coleman's marriage and Edith's death. This sudden and entire forgetfulness of the subject which had engrossed him but a few minutes before struck his guardian as an extraordinary circumstance. Not for the first time a doubt as to Tothill's sanity flashed through Vereker's mind. Perhaps the wretched man was more to be pitied than blamed. If so, Lord Lillebonne must be more carefully guarded against the attacks of a madman than against those of a swindler. A new care arose and sprang, black and heavy, upon Vereker's shoulders ; Tothill must be watched lest he should injure Lillebonne.

Felix persuaded Tothill to walk with him to Kensington, and there got him to

go into the Public Library and sit down to read 'Piers Plowman.' From thence Felix went on to Willow Green, and went up to Coleman's rooms, where the dead wife and the desolate husband yet remained in mute communion. Felix did not feel one whit less acutely the sorrow which had fallen upon his friend, because his own prospects had so wonderfully brightened. Rather, he felt it more from the sharp contrast. It was like plunging from midsummer sunshine into a vault never illumined by daylight.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE REAL EARL.

All I believed is true !
I am able yet
All I want, to get
By a method as strange as new :
Dare I trust the same to you ?

Mesmerism. BROWNING.

HENRY COLEMAN had arrived at that stage of his grief when he could weep. Tears now ran down his cheeks, and he felt the relief which they bring. During the last few days he had gone through those dread-

ful trials which follow on the more dreadful trial. The choice of a grave, the orders for the coffin and for the funeral and for mourning, all these distressing details had fallen to the lot of the young widower, for Mrs. Crane would not take on herself to issue commands. Now, within twenty-four hours the closed coffin would be carried out and placed beneath the damp sod, and all that had been mortal of Edith Coleman would be out of sight, not out of mind.

When Felix entered Coleman's studio, he knew how sad a visit he was about to pay. But he was more touched than he expected by the singular apathetic calm of Harry's manner, broken only by the heaving of a sigh or the escaping of a tear.

At this moment Mrs. Crane was absent, having gone to her own rooms to see how Nellie and Arthur were getting on in her absence. Coleman sat alone beside a table on which his elbow rested; his hand supported his head. He answered Vereker's questions with quiet indifference, and told his own plans without comment.

‘I am giving up these rooms. Peverill, who has those dark rooms below me, has taken them off my hands. He also takes my furniture, except a few things which I give to Mrs. Crane. All my finished and unsold pictures have been bought by a dealer at Brompton. I set myself free of all English trammels. I shall go out to New Zealand by the first steamer in which I can get a passage.’

‘ Leave England ?’

‘ Yes. I have few ties here, and none which I care to tighten. My father has written a kind letter in reply to mine, but he is entirely taken up with Frank’s misdeeds—my younger brother—and has no thoughts for me. I go willingly to the other side of the world, for there is no one here who is sorry to lose me. And yet there may be one.’

Felix grasped Harry’s hand.

‘ In a new land I shall begin all over again. I may turn out a farmer, perhaps ; or I may take to painting again. What does it matter ? Life cannot last for ever, though it may last too long.’

Then tears slowly trickled from Harry’s eyes, and he did not wipe them away. This

unrepressed but noiseless grief was very painful to witness. Felix did not know what to say ; comfort he had none to give. He sat down beside his friend in mute sympathy ; they had nothing that they could say to each other. The light waned, and the twilight deepened, and except for a word or two they were silent. From time to time Vereker's thoughts recurred to Flora and to the pleasant hours spent in Eaton Place ; but his mind was chiefly with his stricken friend. What could he do for Harry ?

At length one thing struck him.

‘ Come home with me to-morrow.’

‘ Home ?’

‘ Yes, to my rooms. I should like to have you there.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We will drive there straight from Kensal Green.’

‘Very well.’

Harry consented listlessly to the arrangements which Vereker suggested; he seemed to have no volition of his own. When Mrs. Crane came in, Felix told her his plan that Harry should stay with him for the present. She made no difficulty, poor woman; she had her own troubles. She had to look to the future of Nellie and of Arthur; she had to earn bread for them all at present.

‘I think sometimes,’ she said, plaintively, ‘that if Lord Lillebonne knew how low I have fallen he would do something to help my boy up a bit.’

He used to be a kind man, the earl.'

Felix noted these words: they bore fruit afterwards.

He left Willow Green in the dusk, promising to be there at ten o'clock next morning. Now, he felt that he must hurry home and write a long letter to Flora. Such kindness as had been shown him that afternoon was enough to evoke a rapturous letter. And a rapturous letter he began, but it grew sober towards the middle, and sad towards the end; for he told of his visit to Harry Coleman, and how the funeral was arranged for ten o'clock next morning, and how poor Harry would return to the Embankment and make his home in Vereker's rooms until the day of starting for New Zealand.

All this and much more Felix wrote to Flora. He also wrote a few lines to his new sitter, the queer old lady whose eccentricities he had not yet fathomed. He asked her to defer her next visit for one day, because on the morrow he had to attend the funeral of the wife of a very dear friend.

On that melancholy morning Felix dressed himself in black, and took an omnibus in the direction of Willow Green. When he arrived on foot at the studios, he saw the hearse and the carriages waiting at a little distance. He went inside the entrance to be out of the way; and as he stood he saw alight from a four-wheeler a young woman whose face he thought he had seen before. He had

hardly time to remember that she was named Anderson, when a second young woman alighted, and in her Felix had no difficulty in recognising Lady Flora. She carried a wreath of white flowers.

Vereker felt that there would be something very incongruous in rushing forward to meet his living love at the very time and place appointed for carrying forth his friend's dead love to her burial. He ran up a few steps to an angle of the stairs where he would be hidden from Flora's eyes, but whence he could listen to the tones of her voice.

Anderson had touched a button which called Quekett from his regions. He came up in his baize-apron and his magenta cap, which latterly he had taken to wearing as

a safeguard against draughts. Around the cap was fastened a piece of black cloth.

‘Would you be so kind,’ said Flora to Quekett, ‘as to give this wreath to Mr. Coleman. I have written my name on a card. I am so sorry!’

Quekett made some suitable reply, and Mrs. Quekett’s deeper voice was heard from beyond him; then the steps of the undertaker’s men sounded in the flagged entrance; Lady Flora and Anderson quietly went back to their cab; Felix took the wreath from Quekett’s hand and carried it upstairs. He thought it very sweet of Flora to have brought it. On the card tied to it was written:

‘From Flora de Vere, with deepest sympathy.’

The thing was done quite simply, as she did everything.

The first part of the funeral service was said in the church where Harry and Edith were married. The wedding had been quiet; the funeral was quieter. Mrs. Crane with Nellie and Arthur followed Harry; then came Vereker; Mr. and Mrs. Quekett came after at some distance; Howland left the now sloppy Green and looked into the church; but the uncle dairyman and his wife were too busy to be able to attend.

The 'Dead March' was not played for the dead Edith. A few minutes sufficed for this first portion of the service. Then came the long drive to Kensal Green. Quekett and Howland went back to their

work ; the other mourners proceeded to that dismal, ruinous cemetery, where half the tombstones have fallen away, and where the stiff clay will grow only weeds.

At the grave Harry seemed half-unconscious, Felix supporting him ; but when the first clod of earth was thrown upon the coffin—‘dust to dust’—he made a movement as if he would have leaped in after his lost wife. He still thought of her as *there*, there, within that wooden box ; he had not yet learned to think of her as a disembodied spirit, radiant in the radiance of God, and, if visiting earth at all, visiting it as a messenger of peace and joy. In after years, Harry sometimes caught a glimpse of something not of this

world, which vanished from his bedside as he woke, which flashed across his closed eyes when he prayed. But in the first bewilderment of his bereavement he realised nothing but that Edith was gone.

That was a sad evening which the two young men spent together in Vereker's rooms. Harry could speak only of Edith, and Felix let him talk on, thinking it best for him to relieve his heart by pouring out all that was in it. Grief is selfish; a man must be happy before he can be unselfish. Vereker, whose own hopes were rising high, could detach his thoughts from his own happiness, and keep them fixed on his friend's sorrow.

But next morning it was necessary for

Felix to go to work ; the queer old lady was coming for her first sitting. Coleman looked blank when he heard of this engagement ; but said he would go out and walk up and down the Embankment. Felix put a small sketch-book and a pencil into Coleman's hands, which took them as if unconscious that they could be used. Nevertheless, when he returned late in the day, Harry had a tiny but effective drawing of Lambeth Palace as seen across the misty river.

The queer old lady arrived—Mrs. Dimblebee from Northamptonshire.

Felix had never had so queer a sitter as this old lady ; he had seldom even seen so very queer a person. Her clothes appeared to be rags tacked together ; on a

worn brown silk skirt were rows of blue ribbon, and small green silk tassels ; here and there jet buttons held in place crimson rosettes. Black lace crossed in curious directions, while a yellow trimming meandered at its own sweet will. Her bust was wrapped round with a drab chudda. Her arms were bare nearly to the elbows, and on her wrists were two magnificent bracelets, one of massive gold with a large emerald, the other a narrow band of diamonds. On her head was a swathing of white net tied under her chin ; at the back of her head was a sort of curtain of rusty black muslin. Over all was a round sealskin cap, in shape like a forage cap. The reader will hardly believe that the above can be a description of any lady's

attire ; but it is a true one, and I myself —*moi qui écris*—can certify to it as a fact.

Mrs. Dimblebee had beautiful features and exquisite silvery hair. If her dress had been reasonably neat, she would have been as charming in appearance as she was in manner. There is no need to say very much about her in this history of the courtship of Lady Flora Vere de Vere. But I may mention incidentally that she caused much wonder and interest in Mrs. Moods, who sometimes called her *Mrs. Bumble-bee* ; sometimes *Mrs. Nimble-knee* ; and sometimes *Mrs. Thimble-bee*.

Mrs. Dimblebee wore spectacles, and when she was sitting occupied herself with knitting.

‘I must trouble you to remove your spectacles,’ said Felix.

‘No, I shan’t,’ said the lady.

‘But I can’t paint your eyes unless you remove your glasses.’

‘Thank you, I don’t want you to paint my eyes.’

Felix stared in amazement, and waited for an explanation.

‘No, Mr. Vereker, you must not paint my eyes ; Lady Greenish, who told me to come to you, has much finer eyes than I have, so you must paint her eyes instead of mine.’

‘What! in your head?’ asked Felix, laughing.

‘Certainly ; they are finer than mine.’

Felix pretended to consent, but managed

to study Mrs. Dimblebee's pretty brown eyes when she thought he was looking at something else. A similar thing occurred with regard to her hands.

'You are not to paint my withered old hands,' she said; 'they are not worth painting. I have a young friend who has lovely hands, and I shall bring her here some day for you to draw them.'

Altogether, Mrs. Dimblebee's sittings caused a great deal of amusement to the artist who took her likeness. In the end her portrait, quaint and odd as it was, was very successful and very artistic.

'People will think it is a picture of your grandmother,' laughed the old lady, with her petulant but kindly manner.

But Vereker's portrait of his great-

great-grandmother excelled in charm that of Mrs. Dimblebee. He was anxious that Flora should see the counterfeit presentment of his ancestress ; he was also anxious that Lord Lillebonne should see it.

On the Thursday morning about twelve o'clock, Felix found himself in Gumm's gallery. There was the 'great-great,' in her blue dress with the gold-spotted scarf, just as in her miniature ; but he had carried on the draperies which fell to her feet and were embroidered in gold round the hem. One little foot, in white satin with gold bows, peeped from under the dress ; the background was a dull grey-green curtain, on which a small gold pattern was faintly indicated. It was certainly a very pretty picture, and Felix

expected that it would make a great impression on Lord Lillebonne.

The gallery was very quiet. Two or three elderly gentlemen were prowling about, gazing with disparaging eyes at all the paintings displayed. Presently there was a little stir in the outer room, and Mr. Gumm was seen escorting the earl and his daughter. Felix went to the door to meet them, and took care to lead them first to 'Mrs. Moods.' Of course Flora thought it a delightful thing; Lillebonne pronounced it decidedly humorous. They lingered some time over it, and Felix, after describing the charwoman's peculiarities, passed on to 'Mrs. Dimblebee,' and told of her attire and of herself. All this time the earl was polite and even genial.

Next they came to 'Buttercups,' of which they had seen the original. Flora enquired after poor Mr. Coleman, and Felix had to tell a great deal about Harry and about poor Edith. Finally they came to 'My great-great-grandmother,' which stood on an easel round a sort of corner, and was encountered rather suddenly.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Lord Lillebonne, stepping backwards.

Flora was alarmed.

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing, nothing; but what an extraordinary coincidence. This is most remarkable. I never saw anything like it. What is the meaning of it? Vereker, who is this lady?'

Felix saw that Lord Lillebonne was

startled and surprised, perhaps distressed.

‘It is my great-great-grandmother,’ said he.

‘Yours? yours! Do you mean mine?’

‘Either that or great-great-aunt,’ said the artist, carelessly; ‘I hardly know which, for I have not been very careful to understand my genealogy.’

‘Sit down, father,’ said Flora, bringing a chair; ‘you don’t seem well.’

‘I can’t make it out;’ and he rubbed his forehead; ‘what can it mean? Do you know who this is?’ and he pointed to the canvas.

‘My ancestress,’ said Felix.

‘My ancestress,’ said Lord Lillebonne; ‘don’t you see, Flora, that the head is merely an enlargement of the miniature of

my great-grandmother which hangs over the davenport in the small drawing-room ?’

‘ So it is,’ cried Flora, growing interested ; ‘ he must have copied it ; even the dress is the same.’

‘ How did you come by this ?’ The earl’s voice and hands trembled.

Felix answered with assumed nonchalance, but in reality he was as much agitated as Lillebonne was.

‘ The miniature from which I painted this picture has been in our family a very long time. If you, my lord, possess a similar portrait it is probable that the two were done by the same artist, that one is merely a *replica* of the other.’

‘ But you said,’ gasped Lillebonne, ‘ that

this is your great-great-grandmother ; I tell you she is my great-grandmother. Do you know what her name was ?’

‘ My father always told me that she was Lady Emilia Howard, who married Francis Felix Vere de Vere, Earl of Lillebonne.’

‘ Good heavens !’ said Lillebonne, again ; ‘ yes, it is so. Who was your father ?’

‘ He was the grandson of Charles de Vere, who killed his cousin Frank in a duel.’

Lord Lillebonne rose from his seat, and staggered away.

‘ Take me home,’ he said to Flora ; ‘ I protest !’

‘ He is not well,’ she whispered to Felix, who feared that his sudden revelation of

himself had been too startling for the nerves of the weak old man.

Flora and Felix, assisted by Mr. Gumm and two of his young men, put Lord Lillebonne into his brougham, and as he was driven away with his daughter he exclaimed once more,

‘ Good heavens ! I vow and protest ! ’

He was not ill ; there was no paralytic seizure, nor even faintness, only utter astonishment. He sat silent in the carriage until he arrived at his house, when he got out nimbly and went straight to his study, Flora at his heels, filled with a vague alarm. She had taken in, from what Felix said, that he must be one of the de Vere family, but further than that she understood nothing.

Sunk in an arm-chair, and looking like a man of eighty, Lord Lillebonne clasped his hands upon his forehead, then flung them up in the air, and then dropped them helplessly at his side, all the time sighing and muttering 'Oh!' as if in agony.

'My dear, dear father!' cried Flora, encircling his neck with her arms, 'what is the matter? Why are you so distressed?'

'My darling, we are ruined, everything is at an end; I am no longer Earl of Lillebonne; you are no longer Lady Flora. Our position, our money, our country houses, all go from us—we are nobodies, nothing!'

'I cannot understand,' said the girl.

'No, my love, of course you can't un-

derstand. But if this be true—and I feel that it is true—that young man robs me of everything. He is the earl, not I.’

‘ But how?—how?’

‘ I see it all. He is the heir; I am the impostor. He takes my seat in the House, he assumes my title, he becomes master of Mont Veraye and of Strath tartan.’

Still Flora could not take in the position.

‘ He could not be so wicked and so cruel as to do that.’

‘ He will, of course he will, and small blame to him. Everything is his by right. I shall have to go down on my knees and beg him to make me some small allowance for the sake of my wife and children.’

‘Poor darling!’ said Flora, tightening her clasp of her father’s neck; ‘if he turns you out I’ll never marry him, not if he should be fifty Lord Lillebonnes!’

‘You would be the only one who would gain by it. You would be the only one who would benefit.’ He spoke very bitterly. ‘Your mother and I will be Mr. and Mrs. de Vere—not even Honourables—your brothers only esquires, your sister only Miss de Vere, for Fitter would back out of it, I am quite sure; but you, *you* will be the Countess of Lillebonne, with Mont Veraye and Strathtartan Castle for your own. Your mother and I will probably die in the workhouse. And oh! the excitement and the chatter in the clubs! Oh, the gossip in the papers! How that

“Veritas” will dress up the truth into a falsehood! But you, Flora, all will be well with you!’

The old man rested his head on his daughter’s arm and wept. She kissed his forehead, and wiped away his tears with her handkerchief.

‘This will never be,’ said Flora; ‘if Felix—if Mr. Vereker—takes your title, he will never have me for his wife. I have held to him when he was in difficulty and trouble, and now that you are in trouble I hold to you. God gave me a father before He gave me a lover, and it must be His will that I should prefer my father in adversity to my lover in prosperity.’

She again tightened her clasp, for she

heard a quick step in the hall, and knew that Felix had followed them.

‘Perhaps, after all, it is not true,’ she exclaimed, defiantly.

Said Felix, ‘I am afraid it is true.’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE END OF THE PRELUDE.

Ah! if you prize my subdued soul above
The poor, the fading, brief pride of an hour,
Let none profane my holy see of love,
Or with a rude hand break
The sacramental cake;
Let none else touch the just new-budded flower;
If not—may my eyes close,
Love! on their last repose.

KEATS.

‘YES,’ said Felix, after a pause, ‘I am
afraid it is true.’

Lord Lillebonne gazed at the young man

with a sort of surprised interest. Could it really be true that this American artist to whom he had refused his daughter's hand, but who had by his patience and constancy almost succeeded in winning it, could it be true that Felix Vereker was the real Earl of Lillebonne?

‘How long have you known it?’ asked the old man, whom we must still call by the title which he enjoyed.

‘Oh, pretty well all my life. From what my Aunt Emily used to tell me—though she did not care at all about it—I knew that we must be related to you. When I came to England and consulted the peerages, and paid a visit to Herald's College, I became morally certain that I ought really to stand in your place.’

‘Can you prove it?’ cried the earl, eagerly.

‘I think I could, if I set to work to do so. I should never have let you know anything about it had you continued to treat me with contempt, because I should be very sorry to owe Lady Flora’s hand to your fear of my position or to your respect for it. But as soon as I saw that you were growing friendly towards me I made up my mind to tell you about myself.’

‘But you can’t prove it?’ said Lillebonne again.

‘I do not mean to prove it. What, drive my father-in-law from the position which he holds with so much dignity? No, my lord, I would rather give up Flora than injure Flora’s father.’

At this point Flora transferred her arm from her father's neck to her lover's.

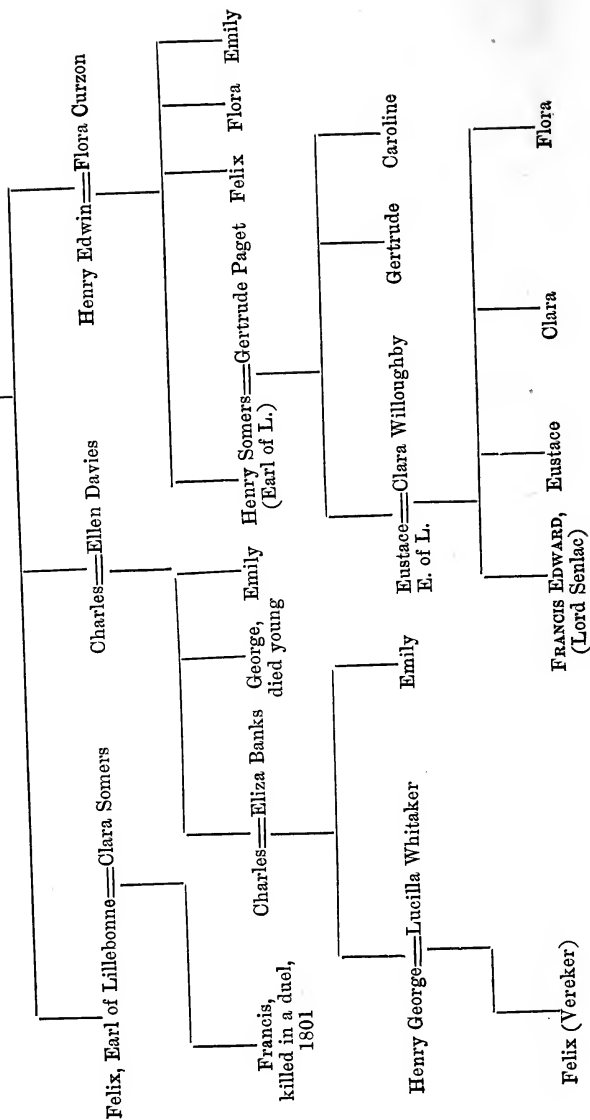
'I knew he was good and noble!' she murmured.

'Yes, yes, *noblesse oblige*,' said the earl.

Felix then explained two or three matters of his history.

'I call myself *Vereker*, not *de Vere*. My grandfather dropped the *de*; my father tacked the last syllable of his wife's name—she was Lucilla Whitaker—to his own name, as a sort of jest, and the mixture became *Vere-ker*, and has stuck to us. I am an only child; my father had no brother, and one sister who died unmarried—dear Aunt Emily! I daresay that if I had had paternal relatives in America

FRANCIS FELIX VERE DE VERE, Earl of Lillebonne==Emilia Howard



I should never have crossed the Atlantic. But I have no reason to suppose that I have any relatives except your lordship and your family. My cousin Flora will not degrade herself by marrying one of her own clan. But she must understand that she will never be Lady Lillebonne, unless, indeed, both her brothers should die without male heirs. I have here a table of my descent from Francis Felix Vere de Vere, Earl of Lillebonne; which I think will make everything plain to you.'

He gave a paper to Lord Lillebonne, who took it and nodded his head over it.

'Yes, yes, you are the real earl; I am the impostor.'

With these words Lord Lillebonne leaned back in his chair, hiding his face in his hands. He who had been all his life so proud of his rank, having indeed little else to be proud of, felt utterly abased in his own eyes when he found that the rank was not his, that he only bore it by sufferance of a young artist.

It is said that in the agony of death by drowning all the memories of a whole life come crowding into a few seconds. So it was now with Lord Lillebonne. The emotions of an uneventful life seemed compressed into a tiny mental space ; one flash of lightning revealed to him himself, what he was and what he is. He sees his irrational pride in his Norman descent ;

his place in the House of Lords ; his position in society ; his two country seats ; his exemption from manual and intellectual labour ; his incapacity for being anything but a stingless drone in the human hive. He knew that if he were not Lord Lillebonne he must earn his bread, and he knows not how he could do it. If this young artist should assert his rights, where would this pseudo earl find himself?

He must resign his title and estates.

‘ Shall I be outdone in honour and generosity by this penniless young fellow? Shall I for the future owe my food and clothing, my very name, to his forbearance? No, I will hide myself in an artisan’s cottage and give up my beautiful

houses to Felix de Vere. Flora may marry him now, if she will. She may live in splendour with the new earl, but I will wander forth, like Lear, into poverty, and tempest, and misery !'

His eyes again filled with tears at the picture of his own unhappiness. But he soon recalled comfort by remembering how Felix had said that he would not claim the peerage. Yes, that would be best.

'I will gracefully accept his generosity, and give him my daughter in return; and then the title and property, which have been in our branch of the family from the year One until the century's end, will still remain undisturbed.'

For if Felix did not claim the earl-

dom, no one else could do so; no one would even know that it could be claimed.

Flora clung to the old man; he gasped out 'My darling child!' to her, and 'My dear boy!' to Felix; and then began to brighten up.

Vereker talked for talking's sake in order to help Lillebonne to more composure, and told how he had been told that his grandfather Charles de Vere escaped to the Continent after that fatal duel; and how, many years later, he returned to England under an assumed name, and went out to Canada; how he married one Eliza Banks, the daughter of a New York tradesman; how his only son, Henry George, married when very young the

lovely Lucilla Whitaker, and became the father of this present Felix de Vere, or Vereker.

When all this story was told, Lord Lillebonne's spirit began to revive. The young footman announced luncheon. Then the earl again sank into the depths of depression.

‘How can we tell Lady Lillebonne?’

‘We will not tell her,’ cried Felix; ‘she shall know nothing. Neither shall Lady Clara know, nor Mr. Fitter. We will not run the risk of injuring Lady Clara in Fitter’s eyes. Nor need Senlac nor Eustace ever be told. But if, as I said before, both your sons should die without a male heir, it will be necessary for me or my heirs to come

forward and prove my place in the succession.'

'Give me your arm, Felix,' said the earl;
'I am a good deal shaken.'

During luncheon, Lady Lillebonne and Clara were informed that Flora's engagement to Felix Vereker was now acknowledged. They received the news very coldly and haughtily; and gave Felix to understand that they did not approve of people marrying out of their proper spheres. This became a source of great amusement to the earl, who found his wife's upside-down view of the position extremely funny.

Felix had informed them of Coleman's projected voyage to New Zealand; he had talked of Mrs. Dimblebee's eccentricities;

in fact, he had pretty well talked himself out, when in the waning light he at length rose to take his leave.

Lady Lillebonne gave him a cold hand, Lady Clara three cold fingers, Jabez Fitter, who had dropped in, a sort of brotherly shake. Lillebonne accompanied Felix to the hall-door, making a point of speaking to him in openly affectionate terms.

‘Good-bye, my dear boy; come in to dinner to-morrow; and be sure to keep yourself disengaged for Clara’s wedding. Ha! what is that?’

A loud report had stunned him, and a flash had half blinded him. He fell back into Vereker’s arms.

The footman and butler had rushed out on the pavement, two passers-by had stop-

ped, a policeman came from the distance. They closed around a man who stood with his arms folded, looking down upon a revolver which lay at his feet.

‘Are you hurt?’ cried Vereker.

‘Yes, yes, I mean no, no, I am not hurt.’ Lord Lillebonne threw his limbs about in order to test their wholeness.

Vereker put the peer on a chair in the hall, and went out to look at his assailant, who was held under the lamp by his captors. As Felix expected, he found him to be Augustus Tothill.

There had collected a crowd by this time, and the policeman had been joined by another constable. Tothill was brought inside the house; the revolver was examined. Lady Lillebonne, Clara, and Flora

had all come running downstairs. Lillebonne was the centre of an interested and agitated group.

‘Thou impostor!’ said Tothill; ‘thou false earl! Yield up thy spoil, or I strike thee dead. Is not thy coronet mine, and thy castle mine, and thy wealth mine, all mine?’

Much more did he declaim in the same style, until, a cab having been brought, the two policemen took him off to the nearest station. After that Felix spent the evening in Eaton Place.

The next day poor Tothill was brought before a magistrate, and remanded in order that his state of mind might be enquired into. It was ascertained that he believed himself to be the real Earl of

Lillebonne, and that he had determined to do some bodily harm to the man at present holding that title. It transpired that his father and his brother had died in asylums. No friends came forward to take charge of him; he had no relative, apparently, but the old lady whose purse he had often dipped into. And she kept in the background.

So the unhappy author was ordered to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure. In his durance he occupied himself with voluminous writings, some of which were of so much value that after revision by the chaplain (himself a literary man) they were published in magazines, and the money obtained for them placed to the account of Tothill's trustees in the Post-office Savings

Bank. It was thought that a long abstinence from alcohol might restore him to his senses.

Now, having brought Lady Flora Vere de Vere to the eve of her marriage, it is time to close this record. Her wedding took place before Christmas, and was a very quiet one. The world rather wondered at Lord Lillebonne giving his daughter to a mere artist. But people do all sorts of strange things in these days. And Felix Vereker was a gentlemanly fellow, and clever, don't you know, and certain to make himself popular as a portrait-painter. The flat on the Embankment soon became as much frequented as if it had been in Melbury Road. On the walls hung 'Butter-

cups,' 'My great-great-grandmother,' and a 'Portrait of Lady Flora Vereker.'

Thus ends the Overture and Prelude to Flora's life; a woman's actual life only begins when her first real love is crowned with the bridal wreath or the willow wreath.

THE END.

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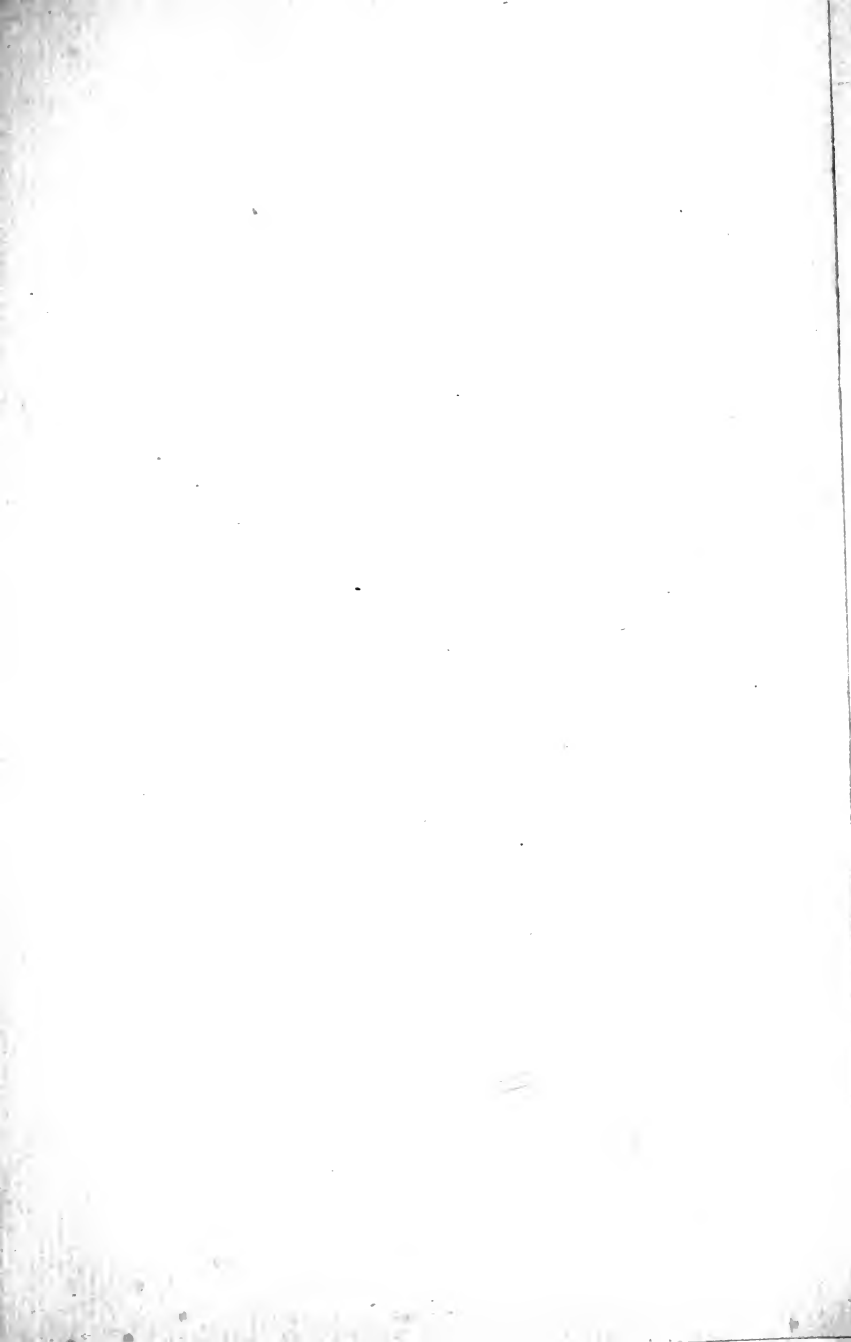
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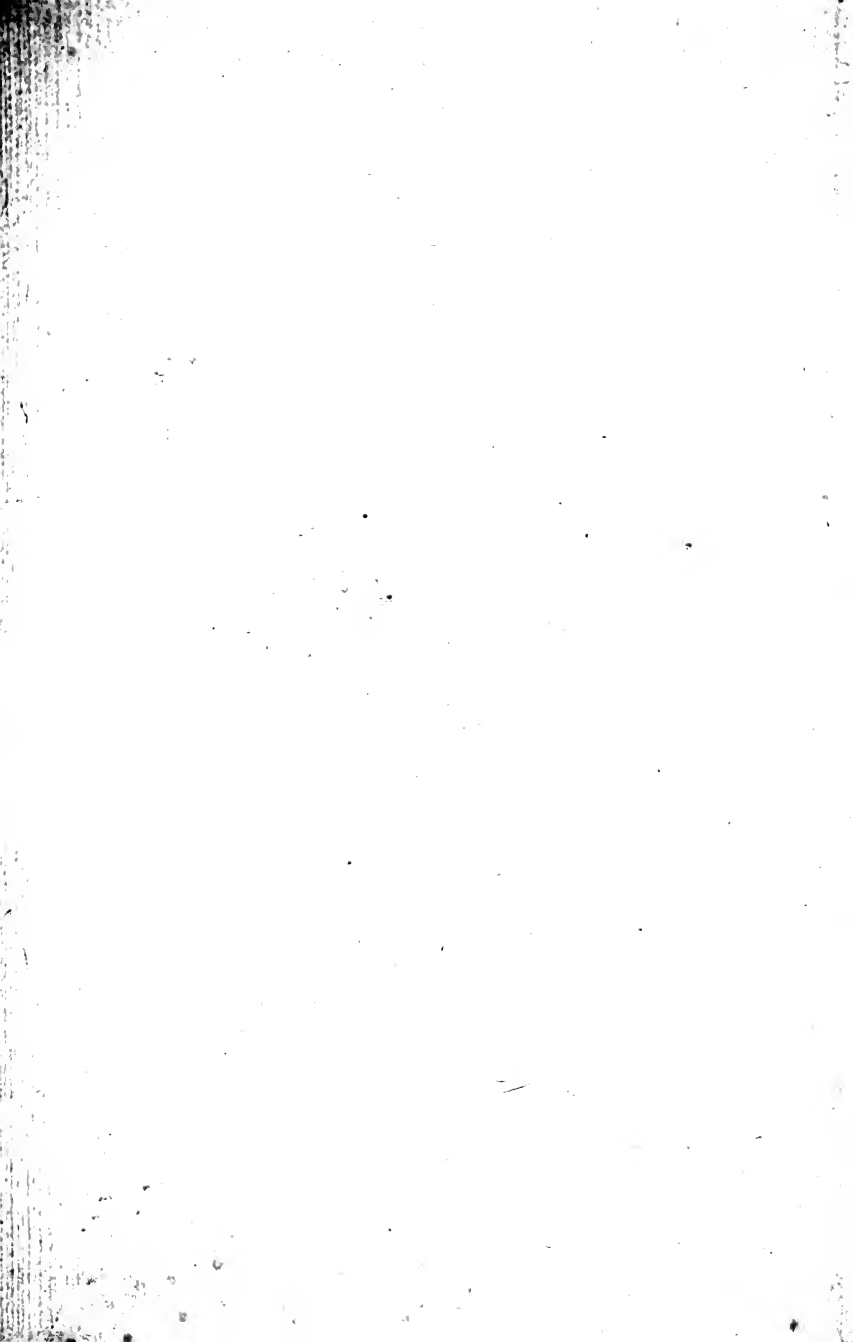
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